

Chapter 4: Cantare Super Librum / Cantare con l'occhio della mente etc.

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Chapter 4: Cantare Super Librum / Cantare con l'occhio della mente etc.¹

Many musicians, including those who studied counterpoint in music schools and academies, might be surprised to learn that the same counterpoint rules used since the late Middle Ages served as the basis for everyday "improvisation" in music, from choirboys to professional singers in cathedral choirs across Europe. While some musicologists might not consider this improvised counterpoint true improvisation, it raises questions about tolerance and open-mindedness towards different interpretations and practices of musical improvisation. In this context, even diminution could be accepted as a form of improvisation.²

However, if we are a bit more tolerant and open-minded, and if we accept diminution as a form of improvisation, then the same can be said to a much greater extent for so-called improvised counterpoint.

4.1.E.Ferand: *Contrappunto*³ *alla mente* or vertical component II:⁴

About Ferand's extraordinary book on improvisation, there has been talk several times since the beginning of this compendium. It is very interesting, among other things, what he writes about a (seemingly) quite spectacular type of improvisation, which appears under several names both in its time and today: *contrappunto alla mente*, *contrapunctus ex mente*, *cantus super librum*, *cantare super librum*, *chanter sur livre*, etc. Before moving on to the writings of more recent authors on this topic, I felt that credit should be given to the author who was among the first to write about this phenomenon, and quite "modern" for his time (1938, before the "Anschluss" of Austria by Austrian and German National Socialists, which led the author to emigrate).

Improvised counterpoint reached its peak in the 16th century. The fundamental difference between its performance in the 15th and in the 16th century seems not to have existed. Ferand emphasizes the difference between diminution and *contrappunto alla mente* (which some other scholars of that time did not see...).

Contrapunctus ex mente was improvised based on strict rules. ...

From the rules on cadences by Andreas Ornithoparchus (1517) it is evident that in *Cantus supra librum* a certain exercise was created, an always present agreement between the singers, from which then certain rules regarding endings, sections, certain formulas regarding tenor turns arise...

I quote here literally what Ferand takes from the above mentioned author:

Ornithoparchus rules in detail:

1. Each clause consists of three notes: last, penultimate and third from the last
2. In the discantus clause, which consists of three notes, the last of them always moves up.
3. In the tenor clause, which also consists of three notes, the last of them always moves down.

¹ As before, I follow the practice that quotations from other authors are indented by 2 units and quotations from quoted author by other 2 units. Author's inserts are into slashes "/", and my inserts are always placed in square brackets.

² See different opinions about that in the introduction and Chapter 1. of this study.

³ Sometimes written as "contrapunto".

⁴ Ernst Ferand, *Die Improvisation in der Musik*, Rhein-Verlag, Zurich 1938. From Chapter V: *Contrappunto alla mente*, Vertical component II.

4. In a baritone clause the last note may sometimes be above, sometimes under the tenor; usually an octave lower, or a fifth higher.
5. The last note of the countertenor can go higher or lower or be in unison with the others. Its movement may be different depending on the type of the song.
6. The discantus clause requires as the penultimate note the sixth above the tenor, or the fifth, when bass has taken the lower sixth.
7. The penultimate note of the tenor is, as a rule, the fifth above the bass; sixth, when the bass takes over the clause from tenor or discantus.
8. When the tenor clause ends on *mi*, as is the case in the second *tone* [mode, modus] or otherwise, the penultimate note of the bass will not be a fifth but becomes a third below the tenor, and unlike the discantus, goes to the fifth, such as from / Phrygian / example visible.
9. When the tenor clause ends on *re*, as is usual in the first mode, the bass will kindly move up from fifth to the third and can (without changing the discantus) end in octave /hypodorian/.
10. Each song sounds better, the more cadence formulas there are. The power inherent in clauses is even able, through their perfection, to make dissonance melodious /agreeable!/. Therefore, students should try to use these cadence formulas as often as possible in their compositions.

In Italy, the art of improvised counterpoint (*alla mente*, later also called *a memoria*) flourishes intensively.

Despite the lack of information or mentions of the art of free counterpoint in the works of theorists from the first half of the 16th century, it is evident that it had been practiced for some time, as even the singers of the Papal Chapel were considered to naturally possess mastery of it.

According to A. P. Coclico, exercises in counterpoint (as also taught by Lanfranco in *Scintille di Musica*, Brescia, 1533) should begin with the counterpoint note-against-note method, and when students have some proficiency with *prima vista*, they can then move on (unlike Lanfranco) to exercises in diminution [florid?] counterpoint, before transitioning from dry theory to the practice of improvised counterpoint singing.

The first Italian [more precisely, Portuguese] theorist explicitly dealing with improvised counterpoint is Vincentio Lusitano, who in his work *Introduzione facilissima, et novissima, di Canto Fermo, Figurato, Contrapuncto semplice, et in concerto...*, (Rome, 1553 and Venice 1558) particularly emphasizes the ability of some counterpointists to avoid parallel fifths and octaves.

The term "*cantare in concerto*," appearing here for the first time, refers to freely contrapuntal singing, as can be seen from Lusitano's title ("*contrapunto semplice et in concerto*"). Ortiz refers to this vocal practice in the same year when he takes it as an example for the joint performance of viola da gamba and harpsichord ("*come se canta contrapunto concertado*"), while another example for instrumental practice is found in Th. de Sancta Marie (1565, see Smith!) as "*tañer en concierto*".

While Lusitano mentions *contrappunto alla mente* only superficially [really?! - see Canguelhem], Lusitanos's great opponent Don Nicola Vicentino devotes a whole chapter to this practice in his famous work "*L'Antica Musica ridotta alla moderna prattica*" (Rome, 1555),

suggesting an interesting change in the practice of that time. Even the title itself, "*Modo di comporre // alla mente sopra i canti fermi*," indicates that the boundaries between improvisation and composition had become interchangeable at that time. Whereas before (if this paradoxical expression is allowed), compositions were improvised, now improvisations begin to be composed in reverse.

Far less considerate than Vicentino (not to mention Lusitano) judges Zarlino (*Le institutioni harmoniche*, Venice 1558) a very widespread practice of singing in thirds at free counterpoint. ... He attacks the customs of conceited and arrogant singers to add a new voice to a polyphonic composition, thus taking care only of the bass, but not of other parts. In this way, there are often "endless" dissonances and violations of the rules, which would be immediately visible if this singing would be written in the notes.

Ferand also mentions the famous case of the maestro di cappella of the cathedral in Udine, Ippolito Chamaterò di Negri, who - perhaps as one of the first - notated improvised "*alla-mente* compositions" over various Introit models, in which free counterpoint was very popular (among his choir students) - what Doni called inexpressive murmuring.⁵

Despite — or precisely because of — many negative judgments about the practice of *contrappunto alla mente*, attempts to limit this type of singing to rules do not stop. It seems that the Nanini brothers (around 1580) are trying to eliminate the shortcomings of free counterpoint to raise the quality of [this practice] through a positive example ...

Ferand dedicated an entire chapter of his book to the practice of counterpoint "*alla mente*," and he concludes with two interesting information:

As late as the beginning of the 19th century, there was a lively practice of this art in the Papal Chapel. According to Bainsi, who describes it in detail, it mainly consisted of singing in parallel octaves, thirds, and tenths, and only in cadences would three-voice harmonies sound in four-part texture (in accordance with the rules of A. Banchieri), but this practice was already in line with what was done in the 15th century.

From the traditional practice of improvised *discantus* singing in Denmark during the 17th century, H.M. Corvinus (Raven) speaks disdainfully of "*sortisatio*," a case left to the form of improvised polyphonic singing by the people.

4.2. Margaret Bent: *Resfacta* and *Cantare super librum*⁶

These terms were first used by Tinctoris and are paired only by him. To judge by scholarly reiteration from Coussemaker to the present day, it seems that few have found cause to question the definition of *resfacta* as written composition and of *cantare super librum* as improvisation on a given tenor. Ernest T. Ferand, the scholar who has investigated this area more exhaustively than anyone else, pointed out apparent self-contradictions in Tinctoris that led him to propose two irreconcilable and contrasting pairs of definitions:

/Resfacta/ may mean either a written contrapuntal composition, plain or florid, as distinguished from improvised counterpoint, again either simple or florid; or it may mean

⁵ Ippolito Chamaterò di Negri, *Li introiti fondati sopra il canto fermo del basso con li versetti et Gloria patri con le risposte ... per tutte le feste maggiori ed altre feste nell' anno a 4, a 5 ed a 6 voci*, Venice 1574. See in the Appendix/ More Music/ Ferand.

⁶ Margaret Bent, *Resfacta* and *Cantare Super Librum*, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, vol.38, no. 3 (fall 1983).

florid, in contradistinction to simple, counterpoint, whether written or improvised—depending on Tinctoris, we believe, the author of the *Ars contrapuncti* or that of the *Diffinitorium*.

Ferand sought to explain this undoubtedly thorny matter by invoking theorists writing around 1500 and later; while illuminating both the subsequent career of the term *resfacta* and of the procedures he had with some hindsight applied to the pair of terms, these explanations do little to explain what Tinctoris meant by them. This paper seeks to demonstrate that the riddle can be solved on Tinctoris's own ground, and that while Ferand rightly recognized that a problem exists, his own presumptions kept him from making the right diagnosis and solution. Definitions published since his article have continued to promulgate the older written-versus-improvised distinction, often without mentioning, let alone resolving, those statements of Tinctoris that led Ferand to his secondary, conflicting definition.

The passage central to any interpretation is the following, offered here with a parallel translation that is intended to be as neutral and literal as possible⁷:

Tinctoris, *Liber de arte contrapuncti* (1477), II.xx

1./Chapter heading:/ That counterpoint, both simple and diminished, is made in two ways, that is, in writing or in the mind, and how *resfacta* differs from counterpoint.

2.Furthermore, counterpoint, both simple and diminished, is made in two ways, that is, either in writing or in the mind.

3.Counterpoint that is written is commonly called *resfacta*.

4.But that which we make together mentally we call counterpoint in the absolute /sense/, and they who do this are vulgarly said to sing upon the book.

5.However, *resfacta* differs importantly from counterpoint in this /respect/, that all the parts / = voices/ of a *resfacta*, be they three, four, or more, are mutually obliged to each other, so that the order and law of concords of any part may be observed with respect to one and all /others/, as is amply evident in this example in five parts, of which first three sound / = sing/ together, then four, then finally all five:

6.But with two or three, four or more singing together upon the book, one is not subject to the other.

7.For indeed, it suffices that any of them /each?/ be consonant with the tenor in those /matters/ that pertain to the law and ordering of concords.

8.I do not however judge it blameworthy but rather very laudable if those singing together should prudently avoid similarity between each other in the choice and ordering of concords.

9.Thus indeed they shall make their singing together much more full and suave.

It is this chapter that has led to the written-versus-improvised distinction subscribed to by all writers including Ferand. While he expressed concern that the evidence of the *Diffinitorium* (which we shall consider shortly) failed to support it, he did not question the imposition of that distinction upon the passage just quoted. My first and most important claim is that this chapter,

⁷ I am giving here only the translation of it.

taken alone, does not require us to assume that improvisation is being discussed; on the contrary, in the context of the treatise as a whole, as well as of the evidence from the *Diffinitorium*, it forces us to assume that Tinctoris meant something rather different. We shall have occasion to qualify the received definition of *resfacta* as written composition, but it is the equation of *cantare super librum* with improvisation that forces upon the pair of terms a contrast that is in turn at the root of the problem of reconciling the apparent conflicts between Tinctoris's statements.

Our understanding of "improvisation" includes the notion of spontaneous, unpremeditated music-making: "The art of performing music spontaneously, without the aid of manuscript, sketches, or memory." (W. Appel) However we might wish to qualify this widely-accepted definition, and for all the careful distinctions made by Ferand himself [in his book on Improvisation], few of those who have echoed the improvisatory definition of *cantare super librum* seem to have felt any discomfort about implying a spontaneous process. One who has is Klaus-Jürgen Sachs, who acknowledges the problem but does not solve it:

/Counterpoint/ can be extemporized (*mente*) or written down (*scripto*). But Tinctoris called the improvised form "straightforward" (absolute) counterpoint (or *super librum cantare*), and the written form *res facta* or *cantus compositus*. . . . This terminology—unknown before Tinctoris and used afterwards only with reference to him—should not be taken to imply that the aim of the theory of counterpoint was improvisation. Tinctoris seems to have wanted to emphasize something else: that, particularly in composition for more than two voices, the result of an improvisation relating several parts contrapuntally to a given tenor . . . differs from carefully planned composition; the inevitable lack of strictness in improvisation is a concession, not the aim of counterpoint.⁸

As Sachs says, and as Tinctoris clearly states, counterpoint must be carefully thought out; this is not inconsistent with *mente*, a word which cannot be opposed to "written" in such a way as to suggest that lack of forethought is more excusable in unwritten than in written presentation. This is a presumption more readily made in our writing-dependent culture than in that of the fifteenth century.

Indeed, there is little in the vocabulary of music theory before 1500 to encourage "improvisatory" interpretations of words such as "mental" and "singing." Even the word "improvisus" is rarely used, and does not in all instances denote desirably spontaneous performance.

We shall see that Tinctoris's rules for sung counterpoint (*cantare super librum*) require careful forethought and, moreover, that there are no signs of "concession" to an "inevitable lack of strictness" in those rules, but rather the reverse. It is hard to imagine that Tinctoris would have dignified as "counterpoint in the absolute sense" a haphazard procedure that would mock the very principles his treatise is devoted to setting out. Tinctoris defines counterpoint thus:

Counterpoint, therefore, is a moderated and rational sounding together, effected by the placing of one sound against another, and it is called counterpoint from "contra" and "punctus."

To understand singing, or at least sounding together, as an essential stage both in the making of counterpoint and also in the realization of polyphonic music, carries with it two linked presumptions, neither of which is widely recognized:

⁸ Klaus-Jürgen Sachs, "Counterpoint," *The New Grove Dictionary*, IV, 837-38.

1. There is no evidence that fifteenth-century composers used scores in the process of composition. A composer could work out his ideas, and/or realize his mental conceptions, by communicating the successively-conceived parts, either orally or in writing, to singers who then substituted for the function of a written score by providing aural, not visual, control over the simultaneities. I develop elsewhere the claim that late-medieval notation, with respect to both pitch and rhythm, was conceptually unsuited for use in score; that where it was used in score (as in keyboard notations) it had to be adapted for the use of a single reader; and that, had late-medieval notation been habitually used in score as a vehicle for composition, it would have changed sooner than it did to a system of unit rather than contextual reference, for both mensuration and pitch. In other words, composers neither had nor needed the visual control of simultaneities that modern scores give us.

2. The singer's task was to apply his contrapuntal training to producing sounds that correctly realized the intentions of the written notation. Sharps and flats have become essentials of our notational system, even though we continue to call the symbols accidentals. It is clear from practice and theory that we cannot regard late-medieval "failure" to notate all the accidentals we need as a failure by *their* standards; not to notate them was not to misnotate musical pitch. The signs of *musica ficta* were truly "accidental" in late-medieval notation. The singer did not add accidentals omitted by the composer or scribe to notes presumed "white" unless otherwise indicated; rather, he had to apply the rules of counterpoint (often, as with Tinctoris, directed explicitly to both composers and singers) to the achieving of correct progressions and correct intervals, "operating *musica ficta*" where necessary. To sing music from written notation required knowledge of the same rules of measure and consonance that would have governed music devised in the singer's own head. In both cases, he had to listen to what was going on and to use his knowledge of counterpoint in order to respond and adjust to what he heard. The singer thus neither merely sang the written notes nor departed from them, but, using them as a starting point, he applied his knowledge of counterpoint and *musica ficta*, familiarity with the piece gained in rehearsal, experience of the style, and aural judgment, to the end of making the music sound correctly. His role was not only vocal but mental; he was an active partner with the composer in the realization of a written composition and an active participant in the creation of new counterpoint. Both activities required the same background of skills and experience, and similar planning and rehearsal.

Our heavy dependence on writing as a means of preserving and transmitting music, serving us as a substitute for both memory and aural control, should not blind us to the possibility of music fully or sufficiently conceived but nevertheless unwritten. This possibility would hold no surprise for musicologists working in earlier or in geographically more remote fields. To remove the presumption of improvisation from this passage in Tinctoris is to present unwritten and written composition or counterpoint as stages in a continuous line of endeavour, based on the same training, rather than as the separate elements implied by our written-versus-improvised antithesis. Tinctoris's *aut scripto aut mente* then emerges as an expression of the possible ways, neither opposed nor mutually exclusive, of preserving music from one performance to another, performance being the end product, the sounding goal, of music, however transmitted. Vocal performance is necessary for counterpoint to happen, either as the realization of what has been written, or as the creation of that which bypasses written storage. Writing is necessary only if transient sounds are to be permanently recorded.

Tinctoris tells us in C II.xx (pp. 372-7 above):

- (a) that *resfacta* differs from counterpoint in the way the parts are mutually related;
- (b) that counterpoint may be written or mental

(c) that the written counterpoint is commonly called *resfacta*. ...

The distinction lies not between written and unwritten music but between composition and counterpoint. Writing does not figure in the definition of *cantus compositus* or of what a *compositor* does; though we might presume that it is a normal if not necessary feature of composition, it is not one that Tinctoris chooses to bring into his pedantic distinction, and it will not help our understanding of it if we do so. We have argued above, following Tinctoris, that music may be “put together mentally” without being written down. *Resfacta* is neither necessarily written, nor is it the same as counterpoint, though both confusions are “common.” We may therefore redefine it minimally as composition, usually but not necessarily written. Thus to lose both “written” and “improvised” as the essential distinguishing features of *resfacta* and *cantare super librum* removes the opposition that has been imposed upon them and leaves us free to examine the minimum qualifications of each, how they may depart from those, and how the apparent contradictions may be reconciled. ...

Further support for the present interpretation of Tinctoris’s use of *resfacta* and *cantare super librum* can be drawn from their occurrence at several points throughout the Counterpoint treatise. The terms are usually paired, and when there is a substitution it is clearly intended as a close synonym. Thus for *resfacta* we also find *cantus compositus*, and hence *compositio*, *compositor*, *componere*; for *super librum cantare* or *cantare super librum* we find *concinere*, *canere* substituted for the verb, also *cantatio*, *cantantes*, *concinentes*, *concentus*; *contrapunctus* is substituted for the whole phrase or rather as the noun expressing the result of that singing.

As we have seen, Tinctoris’s definition of counterpoint gives prominence to the singing or sounding together of parts. This is the end product of counterpoint, whether simple or florid, and whether made and stored in writing or in the mind. It seems fitting, therefore, that “singing on the book” should be associated with the definition of counterpoint in the absolute sense. ...

Counterpoint is a kind of *cantus* that is neither *simplex* nor *compositus* but has its own subdivisions (*simplex* or *diminutus*), The study of counterpoint is the foundation both for singing *super librum* (counterpoint in the absolute sense) and for composition. ...

Tinctoris urges diligent application to and an early start in the study of counterpoint. At no point is there any suggestion that singing *super librum* may be any less rigorous than composition, except in the distinguishing feature that allows *contrapuncti* to accord only with the tenor and not necessarily with each other. More licenses are granted to *resfacta* than to counterpoint. A famous passage lists devices (proportions, syncopations, imitations) that apply both to composition and to singing on the book; it also prescribes that more such means of diversification should be used in a mass than in a motet, and more in a motet than in a cantilena, with the clear implication that there is no distinction between *cantare super librum* and *resfacta* in these respects. ...

All of these observations point clearly to the conclusion that singing *super librum* is a carefully-structured procedure in which only one part at a time can be added to what is already worked out, whether written or not. It is a far cry from the unpremeditated, collective improvisation we have been led to understand by modern writers. ...

Having established that *cantare super librum* alias counterpoint requires advance planning and preparation of a kind that disqualifies it from being improvised in the normal sense, and having eliminated questions of genre, range, and number of voices as differentiating features, it remains to explore how much closer we can get to defining it and its relationship to *resfacta*.

Although “we put together mentally” counterpoint that may be “either written or mental,” the presence of a book is central to *cantare super librum*. Clearly the book contained written music, but of what kind? Tinctoris mentions counterpoint *super planum cantum* and says elsewhere that the tenor may be *planus aut figuratus*. ...

In sum, *resfacta* is composition, usually but not necessarily written, a completed piece resulting from application of, and choices between, the rules of counterpoint. The successive construction of those parts will still usually be perceptible in the finished product. *Cantare super librum* is the singing of counterpoint, following strict rules of interval combinations in relation to a tenor and, with experience and skill, to other pre-existing parts as well. It requires careful, successive preparation. *Resfacta* and singing *super librum* therefore differ but do not contrast in principle, and indeed their results may be so close together as to defy diagnosis. Tinctoris can no longer be regarded as an authority for improvisatory practices, and several assumptions about the nature of early improvisation will need to be re-examined. As is often the case, the revision of an accepted view involves not its reversal but a recognition of the subtler dimensions of the problem.

I shall quote here what Jessie Ann Owens wrote about “composing without writing” or “composing in the mind”:⁹

It may be useful to think of the process of composition as divided into two main phases. One consists of all that the composer may have thought and conceived before writing anything down. ... The other ... concerns the shaping of a composition once it began to take on written form, either on an erasable surface such as slate or on paper.

Invoking the notion of phases helps to describe different kinds of activities: thinking versus writing. But we should be careful not to assume that the phases were necessarily sequential—first the unwritten, then the written—or that the activities were separate. The reality was certainly more complex.

Perhaps the most intangible and elusive of all aspects of compositional activity are the stages where the composer was thinking about the music without writing it down. Simple intuition suggests that composers working before 1600, like those of later times, must have been able to work “in the mind.” We will obviously never capture their thoughts, but we can at least document this phase of their activity. ...

Improvisation was important not only for learning but also for performing a variety of different repertoires, both instrumental and vocal. Banchieri’s barnyard *Contraponto alla mente* is a written-out example of what must have been a common practice. Composing first “*alla mente*” would not have been difficult for musicians who were trained to sing “*alla mente*.”

While there are important differences between singing *alla mente* (singing an improvised counterpoint to a given line) and composing *alla mente* (conceiving the entire fabric of a new composition), both reflect a world in which the distinctions between improvised and written music were not great.

⁹ See more about this in an excellent work by Owens, Jessie Ann: *Composers at Work: The Craft of Musical Composition 1450-1600* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)

4.3. Philippe Canguilhem: Singing with the Mind Eye, The Role of Musical *Visions* in Counterpoint Practice¹⁰

"The imagination depends only on us and our will, and we can see the object before our eyes, like those who are accustomed to translating things with mnemonic signs and inventing symbols." - Aristotle, *De anima*, III, 3, 427b.

In a famous passage from the *Liber de arte contrapuncti* (1477), Johannes Tinctoris explains that the invention of polyphonic music can essentially take two forms. In writing, it appears in the form of *cantus compositus*, or in performance, and Tinctoris says that this oral practice of counterpoint is *vulgariter* called "*cantare sopra il libro*."

This term refers to a well-documented custom in the Renaissance, which consists of spontaneously adding one or more voices to a plainchant melody, transforming the initial monodic chant into a polyphonic piece. The origins of this practice date back at least to the 9th century, but from the early years of the 15th century, its teaching to the disciples of cathedral schools increased significantly, marking a widespread presence of polyphonic performance of plainchant in European churches throughout the Renaissance.¹¹

The development of polyphonic practice and the increasing number of children involved in learning counterpoint - knowledge of which was necessary for "*cantare sopra il libro*" - stimulates the development of new teaching methods aimed at facilitating the assimilation of the rules governing the practice of this creation of music *ex tempore*. These practices primarily concern the knowledge and mastery of permitted and non-permitted intervals - consonances and dissonances - and secondly, the organization of their succession. The common feature of these new teaching methods is that they are supported by memory techniques.

This issue is not new: in her seminal book *Medieval Music and the Art of Memory*, Anna Maria Busse Berger has analysed in detail how memory and its techniques were used to learn the rules of counterpoint, and how in the 15th century improvised polyphonic production was based on two different teaching methods: one mostly widespread in Italy under the name of '*regola del grado*' (rule of the degree); the other developed in England and known today as *sight*.¹² Without going into technical details explaining these two methods, I would like to identify the principles that show how each method, in its own way, actively solicits memory.

The discussion will also help broaden the perspective both from a geographical and historical point of view. In fact, the study of later sources shows that these techniques, previously thought to be confined to the late Middle Ages, were used throughout Europe for a much longer period than is generally accepted by critical literature. Finally, we will see how these two methods, apparently distant in space (England and Italy) and in their mnemonic principles, are found and combined in some theoretical texts, mostly Spanish.

As a preface to our excursus, it is perhaps appropriate to recall the conceptual framework for relating memory and inventio in the Renaissance, in order to frame the '*regola del grado*' and *sight* within a broader cultural context beyond just music theory.

¹⁰ Philippe Canguilhem, *Cantare con l'occhio della mente, Il ruolo delle visioni musicali nella pratica del contrappunto, La performance della memoria*, ed. F. Bortoletti and A. Sacchi (Bologna : Baskerville, 2018)

¹¹ PC: Anna Maria Busse Berger noted that counterpoint was taught to young students of Notre-Dame in Paris in 1411, in Bruges in 1421 and in many Italian cathedrals as Eugene IV decided in 1435. Anna Maria Busse Berger: *Medieval Music and the Art of Memory*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2005.

¹² In addition to the already mentioned book by A.M.Busse-Berger, see also Ph. Canguilhem: *L'improvisation polyphonique à la Renaissance*, Classiques Garnier, Paris, 2015, p. 125-150.

From Memory to Imagination

The difficulty inherent in the practice of sung counterpoint lies in the need to invent a new melody governed by rules. These rules are memorized, as are all the specific situations the singer may encounter when producing their own musical part. Memory can also be used to contain a series of musical formulas that will be used during the performance. However, this mnemonic practice is not aimed solely at the purpose of remembering, but also serves to activate a creative process. Counterpoint, like other creative activities, does not use mnemonic function statically, as an archive of available knowledge: here, memory is primarily conceived as a dynamic process, driving the creative process. It is not a matter of reproducing formulas learned by heart, but of creating new music from these formulas. If memory plays an essential role in this process, it is because, as Leo Treitler pointed out, memory does not reproduce, but reconfigures.¹³

Learning Counterpoint in the 15th Century: the '*Rule of the Degree*' and *Sight-Singing*

To understand how Quintilian's *visiones* function in the case of improvised polyphonic creation, we need to examine various methods of counterpoint teaching in the Renaissance. The 15th-century treatises that transmit these methods privilege the means that facilitate the memorization of consonant intervals and their implementation. Both are based on the practice of solfeggio, which has been taught since the 12th century. Rather than describing their operation in detail here, it is useful to highlight the principles they are based on, starting with the so-called, "rule of the degree."

This method is based on prior knowledge of medieval solfeggio, which associated one of the six syllables *ut re mi fa sol la* with musical notes. Unlike current solfeggio methods, these syllables (*musicales*) could correspond to different notes (*claves*) depending on the melodic context.

To enable the memorization of all the notes of the melodic scale with their corresponding syllables, a mnemonic device had been developed since the 12th century. This device, whose invention had been attributed by medieval tradition to Guido d'Arezzo, used the left hand as a system of *loci* where all the *claves* and *voces* associated with them were placed (Fig. 1).

*IV-1 Canguilhem ex.1a, Fig. 1: Stefano Vanneo, Recanetum de musica aurea, Rome, 1533, p. 9v.*¹⁴

Similar to that of ecclesiastical computing, the information to be remembered was located on the knuckles and fingers within the left hand, and their sequence formed a descending spiral from the tip of the thumb to the upper joint of the middle finger.

The musical hand represented for all medieval and subsequent musicians, a memorial archive where the names of all the syllables with the corresponding musical notes were fixed. Singing, they mentally retraced the spiral path of the places on the hand, which translated into sound through the emission of musical intervals expressed by appropriate syllables. It is not surprising that a counterpoint learning method of this kind was based on knowledge of the musical hand, which indeed represented a universal means of access to solfeggio.

¹³ Treitler L., *With Voice and Pen. Coming to Know Medieval Song and How It Was Made*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, pp. 159: "memory is a process, not of reproduction, but of reconstruction". ("Memory is a process, not of reproduction but of re-construction.")

¹⁴ See Musical Examples A Ch. IV-1 Canguilhem, fig.1, hand.

The Hand (*la mano*) of the counterpoint¹⁵

The principle of the technique called "degree" consists of teaching counterpoint theory without referring to the actual notes, but based on syllables taken from the various hexachords of Guidonian theory. This system allowed the apprentice counterpointist to have easy access to the knowledge of consonant intervals by memorizing a series of solmization syllables. The next step was to maintain the sequences of possible intervals, naturally proceeding in the same way. The necessary and sufficient condition for mastering this technique was therefore to perfectly know the hand. And it is precisely the hand that, considered the most suitable means to master this method, is mentioned in some of the most important treatises explaining the "degree" rule. In fact, the summary tables presenting the possible consonances in the form of a series of syllables are sometimes referred to as the "hand of counterpoint," or "*palma contrapunctorum*," as shown in the illustration from the manuscript (ML 171 J6, c. 47v), preserved at the Library of Congress in Washington (Fig. 2).

*IV-2 Canguilhem-fig.2 - Washington, Library of Congress, ML 171J6, p. 47v.*¹⁶

It should be noted that the connection between this method and the one for learning solfeggio, of which this technique is simply an extension, is perfectly explained by the fact that disciples learned these two systems together from a very young age. A good number of Renaissance musical practice treatises reflect this proximity in their organization: it is not uncommon to see the teaching of counterpoint following that of elementary solfeggio, which in turn precedes the teaching of figured singing */canto figurato/*.

It is interesting to note the practical role of the "hand of counterpoint" in performing counterpoint during plainchant. It's fascinating to note how the manuscript preserved in the Classense Municipal Library in Ravenna¹⁷ offers a clear visual example of how singers used solmization and the hand of counterpoint to generate a second voice while singing plainchant. (Fig. 3).

*IV-3 Canguilhem-fig.3- Ravenna, Classense Municipal Library, ms. 453, c. 5.*¹⁸

This *Benedicamus domino* represents a valuable contribution to the practical understanding of how counterpoint theory was applied in musical performance during the medieval and Renaissance periods.

The *sight*

The method of the degree, in order to be executed, required memorizing a very large number of series of syllables. First, one had to choose the possible sounds for each plainchant note: since there were four possible degrees, the first phase consisted of four series of syllables. Then, one had to be able to combine these consonances with each other, keeping in mind which interval progressions were lawful: this meant that it was necessary to connect multiple series of syllables based on specific rules. Finally, one had to tackle the delicate issue of mutations, which required following additional but indispensable rules: the chapter dedicated to this aspect of practice is entitled in the treatise "methods of operating the degree".

¹⁵ See also Chapter 2, Mariani, p.17.

¹⁶ See Musical Examples A Ch. IV-2 Canguilhem-fig.2.

¹⁷ Ms. 453, copied in Perugia in the late 14th century.

¹⁸ See Musical Examples A Ch. IV-3 Canguilhem-fig.3.

The observations reported here allow us to understand to what extent memory was particularly solicited during the learning of the "degree" method. Although, thanks to the mediation of the hand, the "imagination" was activated at the moment of singing, it remains a fact that the information to be memorized in advance was very numerous. And for this reason, a second method, apparently simpler, spread in England during the 15th century. We do not have certain data, but its success is certainly due to the possibility of visualizing the added voices within the staff where the plainchant melody was positioned, and of avoiding the systematic learning of all combinations of syllables.

The visualization of interval relationships in the musical staff is not a novelty in the 15th century. Treatises had long used this method to spatially represent intervals, depicting the distance between the two notes that constitute them in a scheme that can reach ten lines, or more. English treatises on counterpoint describe a practical application of this way of representing intervals, visualizing consonances in the musical staff. Since the musical staff on which the plainchant was noted was limited to four lines, it was necessary to find a way to make visible signs of the notes that were beyond the extreme lines of the staff. As Anna Maria Busse Berger synthesizes, "since the intervals of the added voice are often too wide to be placed on the same staff without the aid of additional lines, the height is transposed".

This transposition, in reality, functions just like the degrees, and is based on the different hexachords of medieval solmization. Furthermore, the vocabulary is the same, since English treatises speak of "degree" to refer to the different *sights* that are imagined in the score. It is also possible to establish equivalences between *countertenor* and the degree of a fifth, *mene* and the degree of a fourth, *treble* and the degree of an octave.

Sight

However, we need to consider two substantial differences: the first one lies in the fact that the English develop real intervals (such as a sixth, a third, an octave), whereas continental Europeans think in terms of syllables, which are often disconnected from the interval being sung. For instance, if the syllables *ut-ut* correspond to unison in the fifth degree, they produce a fifth in the third degree. The second difference pertains to the visualization on the musical staff: to illustrate its operation, treatises represent the figure of the interval to be sung (6 for a sixth, 3 for a third) on a line or space corresponding to the interval, above or below the note of the plainchant, as depicted in the manuscript (Lansdowne 763) held at the British Library in London. (Fig. 4).

IV-4 Canguilhem-fig.4- London, British Library) 'Lansdowne 763, c. 109v ¹⁹

Thus, the difference between the teaching techniques of sung counterpoint developed at the end of the Middle Ages can be summarized as follows: while the rule of the degree incorporates counterpoint through the hand, the sight technique visualizes intervals in the space of the musical staff.

The introduction of *visible discantus* in the rest of Europe

The new trend "through vision," criticized unequivocally by Bizcargui and the anonymous author of Escorial, actually gradually gained ground in Europe towards the second half of the 15th century. Its geographical origin is mainly attested by the writings of the English theorist John Hothby, whose texts on counterpoint include numerous references to the visualization technique. Hothby (ca. 1430-1487) had established himself in Lucca since 1467, teaching music

¹⁹ See Musical Examples A Ch. IV-4 Canguilhem-fig.4.

at the Cathedral of San Martino. Previously, according to his own account, he had travelled throughout Italy, Germany, France, Great Britain, Spain, and wherever he could impart his skills as a contrapuntist.

In his *Regule supra contrapunctum*, Hothby recalls both the English origin and the novelty of this practice: "But because through the English this method of singing is called visible *discantus*, I will teach you how to see this method below four lines, to which nine rules are given." While the teaching of this practice certainly experienced great diffusion, the reasons for the introduction of sight in Italy cannot solely be attributed to Hothby's work. The most eloquent testimony of the impact that *contrapunctus visibilis* - to use one of its expressions - had in Italy in the 15th century is actually also due to the work of Nicolò Burzio from Parma. In his *Musices opusculum* (Bologna, 1487), Burzio attributes this practice to musicians from beyond the Alps and in particular to the French: ...

This conceptualization of the visual dimension of music by a musician who preferred memorizing consonances through syllables finds its counterpart in one of John Hothby's treatises, which proposes a reverse path: the English singer, favourable to *discantus visibilis*, combines the syllables of solmization with the intervals visualized in the staff, providing a sort of synthesis of the 'rule of the degree' and that of *sight*, as illustrated in the manuscript copy (ms. O 29, c. 21) of the Biblioteca Vallicelliana in Rome (Fig. 5).

*IV-5 Canguilhem-fig.5 - Rome, Vallicelliana Library, ms. Or 29, c. 21.*²⁰

The introductory text specifies: "And so that the *scientia del contrapuncto* may be clearer to you, I want to give you six universal rules so that you may have counterpoint most perfectly. And these rules serve the six voices of music, that is *ut re mi fa sol la*." Six diagrams follow, combining the spatialization of sounds and the indication of their nature through a number, with the addition of their syllabic translations. Note that the syllables mix the different degrees without ever referring to this concept.

Conclusion: "*ut successum extemporalem*"

As indicated in Appendix B below, visual counterpoint does not disappear from teaching texts at the threshold of the 16th century. Traces of it can be found until the mid-17th century in Italy, a country that seems to have particularly appreciated its use. Vicente Lusitano certainly gives an effective presentation of it in a manual published in Rome in 1553 and reprinted in Venice in 1558 and 1561:

"Because all the notes that are sung extemporaneously above the Cantus Firmus are to be seen, the five lines of the chant make four spaces, thus the first high line is the octave of the first space below, and vice versa, and so on with the others, thus if the chant goes beyond the highest line, the eye will immediately go to its lower octave, which is the first space below, and thus it can ascend and descend through the five lines and four spaces as much as desired, and this I give as something highly commendable, because from this arises the ease and great skill of some counterpointers, that is, to see all the notes, and not to go about like blind men."

The precision and simplicity of these words explain why half a century later, Pietro Cerone decided to translate word for word this passage, which consecrates the development of visual counterpoint. Cerone was originally from Bergamo, but his treatise is written in Spanish, the official language of the court of Naples where he served as a singer in the Royal Chapel.

²⁰ See Musical Examples A Ch. IV-5 Canguilhem-fig.5.

However, Cerone does not limit himself to a simple transcription: the excerpt is found in the midst of a discussion that represents the most complete adoption of sight for which evidence exists today, and which deserves a separate study.²¹

4.4. Johannes Menke: "*ponere vel facere*"²²

Reflections on Performance Practice and Improvising Counterpoint in the Renaissance

The view on counterpoint in the Renaissance is currently undergoing a profound change. Just 20 years ago, the prevailing notion was that counterpoint was a strict set of rules used to create complex polyphonic works. Mastery of the so-called classical vocal polyphony, the "Old Style" or, as some say, the "strict style," was considered an essential skill providing a solid foundation for composition. I do not intend to fundamentally challenge this view, which dates back to the 17th and 18th centuries. Indeed, the vocal polyphonic style of the 16th century became a *conditio sine qua non* of composition technique in the 17th century. Even J.S. Bach studied Palestrina, and Jan Dismas Zelenka prepared a score of all Magnificats by Christobal de Morales for study purposes – just to name two examples.

However, with the shift in the compositional techniques of the 16th century toward a classical musical language, akin to a kind of classical Latin that everyone had to learn, some essential aspects were lost. I would like to mention just two of them. Firstly, counterpoint is not limited to a specific style or genre, nor to a specific degree of compositional complexity. It is rather a kind of basic musical grammar underlying all kinds of polyphonic music. If we were to seek analogies, we might say that in the Renaissance, counterpoint served the function that music theory serves today. As *Contrapunctus simplex*, it regulates the note-against-note style, i.e., chord progressions, as soon as more than two voices are involved. For polyphony in the true sense, *Contrapunctus diminutus* is needed, where the note-against-note style is broken figuratively. The term "*contrapunctus*" encompasses both: Even a simple chord progression is a *contrapunctus*.

Secondly, while it has long been known, it has only fully come to light in recent decades that counterpoint was practiced both in written and unwritten forms, i.e., improvised. Research has progressed in this regard, and instructive textbooks have been published.²³

But let us first return to the term "counterpoint" itself. The earliest known definition is found in the treatise *Cum notum sit*, attributed to Johannes de Muris and dating back to the mid-14th century:

"And first, let this definition of counterpoint be given: counterpoint is nothing else but to set one point against another, or to set one note against another, and it is the foundation of polyphony. And because no one can build anything if they have not first laid a foundation, likewise no one can sing polyphonically if they have not first made a counterpoint."

'*Ponere*' means to set or establish something, '*facere*' means to do something. Counterpoint can thus be a set object or the result of an action, it can be written down or executed spontaneously.

²¹ PC: Cerone P., *El Mellopeo y maestro*, Naples, 1613. The question of visualization is dealt with in Book IX, ch. 19-23, p. 577-82. A translated passage from Lusitano is found on p. 579.

²² Johannes Menke: "*ponere vel facere*", Überlegungen zur Aufführungspraxis und Improvisation des Kontrapunkts in der Renaissance, Vortrag auf dem Leipziger Improvisations Festival 2013, 22. September 2013

²³ For example, Giorgio Pacchioni, *Il Canone alla cartella e alle mente sopra il tenor* and *Il Canone alla cartella e alle mente senza tenor*, Bologna 1997, Barnabé Janin, *Chanter sur le livre*, Manuel pratique d'improvisation polyphonique de la Renaissance (XVe et XVIe siècles), Lyon 2012 or Philippe Canguilhem, *Chanter sur le livre à la Renaissance Les traités de contrepoint de Vicente Lusitano*, Turnhout 2013.

We also learn that it has something to do with planning: A note-against-note style must be designed or set in order to give stability to polyphony.

Later theorists also assume that counterpoint is improvised or written. The rules and recommendations they set forth are always directed at both: improvisers, composers, as well as singers who need counterpoint knowledge to be able to sing confidently from choir or vocal books. Scores were indeed published since the second half of the 16th century; they were demonstrably used in composition and composition treatises. However, we have no evidence that scores were used for performances. Counterpoint was thus heard in the correct singing of the individually recorded voices; it was nowhere visible or tangible as a whole, but rather a spherical entity conjured up by the singers. This magical moment of counterpoint is not to be underestimated in terms of the musician's experience. The often enigmatic canon instructions, where one notated voice suddenly becomes two, three, or four, are an intensified form of this magical moment.

Certainly, a form of magic also occurs when singers improvise polyphonic counterpoint. This was usually done "*super librum*," literally "over the book." All singers stood over the book, in which one voice was notated, often a Gregorian chant, and added "*ex improvviso*" other voices. Polyphony was one possible performance practice of the chant, but even independent of the chant, unwritten counterpoint was practiced both instrumentally and vocally.

It is not my intention to discuss how this is accomplished now. Relevant techniques have since been rediscovered. There is research on this topic and ensembles (such as the *Ensemble Chant sur le livre* under the direction of Jean-Yves Haymoz) that have reconstructed and adopted these techniques. At the *Schola Cantorum Basiliensis*, attempts are made to practice improvisation in various subjects, in the main subjects, in ear training, in composition, in diminution lessons, etc.

Now, I want to reflect on how to understand the practice of counterpoint, which obviously can manifest in composition or improvisation. It's about the relationship between "*ponere*" and "*facere*." Is it an opposition or do they have a close interrelationship?

We won't be able to definitively resolve this question, but I'd like to share some thoughts on it.

One of the most striking and clearest statements on this topic comes from Adriano Petit Coclico, who claimed to be a student of Josquin (and likely was) and published a *Compendium Musices Descriptum* in Nuremberg in 1552, explicitly targeting a German audience. This context is important to understand some of his statements.

Let's see how he begins his chapter on counterpoint. Usually, this is where a definition of the term is provided. Coclico takes a completely different approach:

DE REGVLA CONTRAPVNCTI, ...

"The technique of singing counterpoint is rare in Germany; probably for no other reason than that this art, although very beautiful, is learned through daily practice and with great effort, and those who master it don't even receive praise for it."

The practice of "*canendi contrapunctum*," singing counterpoint extemporaneously, was tied to a specific culture and particularly to specific educational structures that were apparently not present - or were no longer present due to the Reformation - in the German-speaking region. However, it's not as if improvising counterpoint was a rare skill mastered by only a few, as if it were the highest level of contrapuntal magic. On the contrary, the highest level, according to

Coclico, is also the written composition, with Josquin being its unsurpassed master. Singing counterpoint extemporaneously, however, is the prerequisite for this! Coclico makes this quite clear at the beginning of the chapter on written composition:

DE COMPOSITIONIS REGVLA

"About the rule of composition with notes, syncopes, and ligatures.

There were many who considered themselves composers because they followed the rules and methods of composition, albeit without using the right handling of counterpoint; Josquin despised and mocked them, saying they wanted to fly without wings.

The first thing one wishes from a good composer is that they can sing counterpoint extemporaneously. Without that, nothing will come of it.

Secondly, that they feel a great desire for composition, and they are driven by a natural urge to compose... "

Coclico continues, saying that one should no longer know hunger and thirst when searching for the perfect form of their composition.

Let's put it somewhat dramatically: The masterpiece created by a great artist is the pinnacle of contrapuntal art, yet this pinnacle rests on the pedestal of improvisation!

Considering the poor state of the latter in Germany, one can imagine how the Flemish Coclico assessed the musical life and composers of his chosen temporary homeland.

His emphatic commitment to the masterpiece, however, might have appealed to the Germans.

Under the guiding principle of 'Musica poetica,' theorists such as Nikolaus Listenius, Herrmann Finck, or Gallus Dressler developed a concept of composition aimed at producing an exemplary masterpiece, which they sought to distinguish from improvisation, which they perceived as deficient. Let's hear from Gallus Dressler. In his *Praecepta musicae poeticae*, written in 1564, he provides the following definitions:

"What is Musica poetica? It is the art of inventing a musical song.

It differs from the /two/ other parts of music: Musica theorica reflects, Musica practica sounds forth. This one (Musica poetica), however, puts together new harmonies and leaves behind a perfected work, even after the author's death.

Musica poetica is twofold and consists of *Sortisatio* and *Compositio*. *Sortisatio* /from Latin *sors* = fate/ is, as its name suggests, an unexpected and self-propelled improvised performance (*pronuntiatio*) over a foreign song, for multiple voices.

It is more common abroad than with us and it is more determined by custom than by regulations. It comes from *Compositio*; however, it is by no means free from errors. Therefore, let us set it aside and come to *Compositio*, as it is not customary to discuss *Sortisatio* in writing and entrust it to students.

What is *Compositio*? It is the collection of various voices of harmony with restrained consonants according to true reason, and it has a species called *Contrapunctus*."

Here, the term contrapuntal refers only to the written *Compositio*! Dressler harbours an obvious mistrust of improvisation, apparently stemming from its susceptibility to errors. His ideal is the

flawless artwork; risky improvisation is not even considered - as with Coclico - a useful vehicle, rather it is denied the dignity of belonging to contrapuntal music altogether.

When comparing Coclico and Dressler, who were active in Germany around the same time - around 1550 - we can see how different their views were. As contrary as their opinions are, they clearly confirm the finding that outside of Germany there was a lively culture of improvisation, but apparently not within Germany. Thus, there can be no talk of a uniform practice of contrapuntal music in Europe regarding the role of improvised counterpoint. ...

Allow me to offer a small performance-related critique at this point: I often have the impression that in performances of 16th-century music, these aspects of *Pronuntiatio* are neglected. This is especially true for vocal sacred music, which is reputed to be somehow strict, abstract, and intellectual. Often, there is an attempt to freeze the stage of *Elaboratio*: pitch and rhythm are reproduced as precisely as possible, but all other parameters are reduced or flattened to zero. Thus, one hears vocal music of the *cinquecento* everywhere in flawless intonation and transparent polyphony, but without diminutions, dynamics, with little *musica ficta*, hardly any articulation, and overall largely devoid of affect. In the meantime, a name has even been coined for such a musical ideal: it is referred to as the "Oxbridge Sound". Renaissance music, in such a guise, appears as an ascetic and spiritual counterworld to the lively Baroque. Such a Bauhaus aesthetic is certainly useful for marketing. However, I have not found any indication of such an ascetic performance ideal in any source. Everywhere, there is talk of the sweetness of harmony, the affect of music, and the ornamental decoration of the lines. ...

Let's make a breakthrough as improvisers: Let's not only improvise pitches and rhythms, let's consciously improvise articulation, dynamics, *musica ficta*, and diminutions. The repertoire could surprise us and show a completely new face.

4.5. Johannes Menke: "Ex centro" Improvisation, sketches for the theory of sound progressions in the early Baroque²⁴

This is the first of three very interesting articles published by the Belgian "Orpheus Institute" (by Leuven University Press) in 2014.²⁵ All three authors, Johannes Menke, Peter Schubert, and Rob C. Wegman, can (along with Philipp Canguilhem and Julie E. Cumming) be considered today's musicological avant-garde in the field of improvised singing on the book. It is important to note that Julie E. Cumming and Peter Schubert, in addition to being researchers and educators, also engage in this as practitioners, in a sort of musicological laboratory.

1. The Baroque turning point

It is a commonplace idea that after 1600, everything in music changed completely. The Baroque era started with monody, figured bass, opera, the "affects" and so on, whilst old-fashioned polyphony remained the same; so goes the accepted cliché. One can create wonderful antipodes like *prima pratica* against *seconda pratica*, the good Monteverdi as opposed to the bad Artusi, and good advancement against bad conservatism. Of course, history is not so simple. Musical style has many aspects — form, sound, harmony, counterpoint, articulation, melody etc. — and not all of them changed at the same time. The basic principles for organizing sound progressions, which are valid for composition as well as for improvisation, had already been established in the 16th century and many did not change.

²⁴ Johannes Menke : "Ex centro" Improvisation, Sketches for a theory of sound progressions in the early Baroque, For Ludwig Holtmeier, part of a edition, *Improvising Early Music*, Orpheus Institute, Leuven University Press, 2014.

²⁵ All three article could be found an download from: www.academia.edu

It is another common thought that the 17th century represents a transitional epoch. It lies between modality and tonality, between classic intervallic counterpoint (the *stile antico*) and the new harmonic counterpoint of the Baroque, and between vocal and instrumental polyphony. In spite of the experimental character of many pieces, there existed a clear technique of composition and improvisation which was founded on the roots of Renaissance polyphony.

This paper will concentrate solely on the question of sound progression, to which the topic improvisation will be linked. The term "sound progression" has been consciously chosen in favour of "chord progression"; until the 18th century, there seems not to have been a clear concept of the chord. The chord is above all a phenomenon of performance practice, and is therefore often called a "hand position" ("Griffe"). Nevertheless, the concept of sound progression, defined by the contrapuntal relationship of the outer voices to one another is the basis for improvisation as well as for composition. Here, a very important change happened: the outer-voice setting, which had been well established in the 16th century, became prevalent. Rolf Dammann distinguishes the "*con centro*" sound structure of the Renaissance from the "*ex centro*" sound structure of the Baroque, arguing that whilst the *con centro* structure was focussed around the tenor in the middle, with the other voices being imagined in relation to it, the *ex centro* structure was clearly founded upon the bass over which the soprano built the framework. Sometimes — as in the trio sonata - the upper voices even seem to fight against one another, with each one attempting to become the highest voice.²⁶ Thus the *ex centro* sound structure emphasizes the "surface" of music. The skeleton is not internal, like the tenor in the *con centro* structure, but has become visible on the exterior. Composition and improvisation both take the surface as a point of departure from which they can execute their designs. ...

The priority of the outer voices in fact started in the 15th century, where a clear relationship between the cantus and the contratenor bassus can often be observed, above all in four-voice settings, in which the tenth is often preferred between the outer voices - presumably because of its sensual sweetness. Nevertheless, most theorists do not describe the priority of the outer voices, but rather a system of completing the composition by adding voices. One important exception to this, of course, is the treatise *Libro Llamado Arte de Tañer Fantasia* (1565) by the Dominican Thomas de Sancta Maria. Here, Thomas gives ten possibilities for "harmonizing" a scale and defines them according to the relationship between the outer voices. The fourth manner (*cuarta manera*) consists of using tenths and twelfths, in other words with thirds and fifths between the soprano and the bass (without the octave).

Example IV-6 Menke ex.1, Thomas de Sancta Maria, Libro llamado Arte de tañer Fantasia (1565), p. 22: "La quarta manera se haze subiendo o baxando a dezenas y dozenas" /²⁷

Whereas these intervals are very often used in the fifteenth century between tenor and contratenor (combined with sixths or octaves between soprano and tenor), their alternation becomes a widely-used model for outer voices.

Example IV-7 Menke ex.2: Use of alternating thirds and fifths, Gilles Binchois: "Se la belle" (bars 5-11) /²⁸

²⁶ JM: This is the opposite of the typical crossing tenor and contratenor voices in the 15th century, where these voices seem to be fighting to become the lowest voice.

²⁷ See Musical Examples A Ch. IV-6 Menke ex.1.

²⁸ See Musical Examples A Ch. IV-7 Menke ex.2.

The *con centro* 3-5 structure then becomes an *ex centro* one. One can find these 3-5 settings in the *Cancionero musical de Palacio*(1505-1525) as well as in Giulio Caccini's collection *Le nuove musiche* (1601/1614).

*Example IV-8 Menke ex.3: Giulio Caccini (—1550-1618), 'Tu ch'hai le penne', from: Le nuove musiche II (1614)*²⁹

*Example IV-9 Menke ex.4: Juan del Encina (1469-1529), „Si abrâ en este baldrés“, from: Cancionero musical de Palacio (1505-1525), External voices*³⁰

One advantage of the 3-5 setting is that the octave is reserved for the beginning and ending, so that the cadence is a real “*perfectio*” (3-5-8). Harmonizing a given melody, one can easily find a solution that also has thirds and fifths between the outer voices if the melody moves in leaps as well as in steps, as the following example will demonstrate:

*Example IV-10 Menke ex.5: Bass to a given melody with alternating thirds and fifths: 'O Heiland, reiß die Himmel auf, Friedrich Spee, 1622 (Augsburg, 1666)*³¹

The third middle voice can now proceed in parallel thirds with the soprano, or can alternate between thirds and fifths.

Using this simple method, the composer or improviser is quickly able to find a “harmonization” that sounds convincing, without thinking about “tonality”, or degrees of the scale, etc.

2. Skeleton and diminution

One of the fundamental aspects of Western composition is the differentiation of a note-against-note framework and its diminution, that is to say the differentiation of a simplex and a *contrapunctus floridus*. In the second half of the 16th century, diminution seems to have become more and more important for the performer, as can be seen in the treatises of Thomas de Sancta Maria and Diego Ortiz. The thinking in stylistic patterns with which the progressions of the *contrapunctus simplex* could be embellished also remained into the 17th century, although the style changed. Comparing the diminution models of Thomas de Sancta Maria (in his *Libro Llamado Arte de Tañer Fantasia* /1565/) and Francesco Rognoni (in his *Selva de varii Passaggi* /Milan, 1620/), the stylistic change is clearly perceptible: Rognoni uses more extensive passages and typical Baroque ornamental dissonances which Christoph Bernhard described as “superjectio”, “anticipatio”, “subsumtio” etc. These models can be used in composition as well as in improvisation. In the well-known “aria” in the third act of his *Orfeo* (1607), Monteverdi provides a proposal for ornamentation. In this scene, Orfeo wants to persuade Caronte to give him back Euridice. For this purpose, Orfeo utilises all his skills and sings - following Monteverdi's proposal - a very “*ex centro*” embellished melody over an ostinato bass, which is based on the *Passamezzo* model (indicated by stars). The following example shows the dyadic outer-voice skeleton (without the ritornellos) together with an analysis of the intervals used (the last verse, which is similar to the fourth, has been omitted).

*Example IV-11 Menke ex.6: Monteverdi: Orfeo, Act III. Outer-voice-reduction of Orfeo's aria*³²

²⁹ See Musical Examples A Ch. III-8 Menke ex.3.

³⁰ See Musical Examples A Ch. IV-9 Menke ex.4.

³¹ See Musical Examples A Ch. IV-10 Menke ex.5.

³² See Musical Examples A Ch. IV-11 Menke ex.6.

Monteverdi clearly prefers a 3-5 setting. This evokes the image of an improvising singer, who gravitates towards the 3-5 structure and fills it out with his own expressive and *ex centro* melodies. Octaves are almost entirely reserved for cadences. In the third verse, in which Orfeo says he will depart through the dark air (“cammin per l’aer cieco”), Monteverdi’s exclusive use of fifths is noteworthy. When Orfeo declares that he will reach paradise if he sees her beauty again (“Ch’ovunque stasis tanta bellezza il paradise ha seco”), Monteverdi allows him to go up to a high F (in the embellished version) and down to a B natural. This shows that even such a simple and model-like skeleton is able to express the meaning of the text. The chromatic passage at the end of the fifth verse also relates to the text (“Ahi, chi niega il conforto a le mie pene?” / “Ah, who can deny me comfort in my torment?”) and is also constructed as a 3-5 setting, using a third and then a fifth over the descending semitones in the bass. The continuo player has to play sixth chords above the F sharp and the E sharp in order to avoid diminished fifths. In any case, the 3-5 setting can also be used in chromatic situations. ...

5. Ostinatos

So far, the 3-5 setting, “combinatorial” thinking, sequences and the scale-related use of sixth chords have been considered as categories for constructing sound progressions. Two very important categories must be included as well: ostinatos and dissonant sound progressions. A catalogue of ostinato patterns will not be included in this paper, but their enormous importance and widespread circulation cannot be overemphasised. It was fashionable to use them in compositions as well as in improvisations. Indeed, it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the 17th century — particularly the first half — was the century of ostinatos. All ostinatos are related to a certain bass progression, but some of them, like the *Passacaglia* or *Chaconne*, only have fixed points and can be varied between these points in many ways. For our special interest, it is important that some of these ostinatos are connected with certain interval progressions in the outer voices, meaning that the ostinatos are defined differently. These could be categorised according to measure, mode, interval skeleton, bass progression, melody and character, but very few of these represent constitutive categories. For instance, the *Passamezzo antico* is defined by its mode (transposed ‘Dorian’ in G) and by a certain bass progression (G-F-G-D/G or B flat/-F-G-D-G), and can appear in different metres (as in the *Gagliarda* or *Pavana*) and can have different melodies. The *Romanesca*, however, is in the same mode and has a similar bass progression (B flat-F-G-D/B flat-F-G-D-G), but is always connected by a triple metre and a 3-5 setting in the outer-voice skeleton (as in the famous *Greensleeves*). This skeleton can sometimes be abandoned in variations but still always resonates through the composition. Thus 10 of the 14 variations of Girolamo Frescobaldi on the *Romanesca*, for example, begin with a third in the outer voices, clearly signalling the *Romanesca* opening. In contrast, the *Folia* (both the early and the later model) is used mostly in the untransposed D mode and is defined by an 8-3 setting in the outer voices.

*Example IV-12 Menke ex.12: Outer voice-skeletons of arias*³³

The 3-5 and 8-3 settings are connected to each other because the third voice in a 3-5 setting is an 8-3 setting and vice versa. If an ensemble is improvising a *Romanesca* the players can agree beforehand who will take which of the two parts. During the variations they will change their roles.

³³ See Musical Examples A Ch. IV-12 Menke ex.12.

6. Dissonant progressions

Perhaps the most significant development regarding the construction of sound progressions was the increase of dissonant syncopations during the 16th century and the subsequent use of dissonant chords during the 17th and 18th centuries. In the compositions of Palestrina, which were judged as models for composition around 1600, dissonant syncopation is omnipresent and has achieved some independence from the cadence, from which it actually originates. In this respect, Palestrina's music is not as conservative as is often supposed. It is known that theorists such as Vincenzo Galilei described some great liberties concerning the treatment of dissonances. To understand the historic development, it is perhaps more interesting to see which models actually became standard during the second half of the 16th century. Only three intervallic combinations, whose entire potential unfolded during the 17th century, will be emphasized here.

a) The consonant fourth inside a certain cadence formula, which Nicola Vicentino dubbed "sincopa tutta cattiva". Vicentino judges this formula to be "non /.../ moderna", maybe because it was used very often in the Frottola-repertoire around 1500.

7. Conclusion: 'ex centro' improvisation.

To summarize: there were not different sets of rules for improvisation and composition during the 16th and 17th centuries. But there was an unfolding of possibilities in the early Baroque. To understand the technique of improvisation, one must understand the principles of compositional technique in general. The key to understanding this lies in the concept of sound progressions, already established in the 16th century and, as skeletons, the basis for composition as well as improvisation, 'ex centro' thinking. Since other qualities of Baroque music were also *ex centro*,

it would be worth concluding by reviewing the different aspects which define *ex centro*:

- The sound structure is *ex centro* when one takes the outer voice as a constitutive skeleton.
- Finding as many variants as possible has an *ex centro* quality (for a skeleton or for a diminution, see Spiridionis!).
- Compared with the 16th century, the style of diminution has become *ex centro*.
- The representation of 'affects' is *ex centro* because the musical structure is always a consequence of the 'affects' which are to be represented.
- The unfolding of infinite variations over relatively simple ostinato patterns is an *ex centro* activity.
- Dissonances are used in an *ex centro* way: firstly, by being used very frequently; secondly, by building dissonant chords; and thirdly, by establishing new resolutions.
- Original middle voices are treated as *ex centro* outer voices. They can be changed and new basses can be added to them. This combinatoriality produces new treatment of dissonances, as well as new standard progressions.

The roots of all of these developments lie in the late 16th century. Evolving towards the Baroque era, the composer, as well as the improviser, moves more and more in an *ex centro* fashion on

the surface of music, and this surface is then to become the stage for a genuinely Baroque musical theatre.

4.6. Peter Schubert: From Improvisation to Composition³⁴

Having learned these types [of interval] and the method, here is how we ought to use them: The boy provides himself with a slate on which one may write and erase; he takes a Tenor from plainchant and at first writes note against note, using these types. Whenever he has gotten used to making note against note by improvisation and has become practiced in it, then he can go on to florid counterpoint. In this, when he has become trained, he will put aside the slate and learn to sing in improvising on a plainchant or on figured music printed in a book or copied on a sheet of paper.³⁵

Although it is well known that improvisation played an important role in Renaissance musical life, the details of this polymorphous practice in the sixteenth century have not been sufficiently investigated. There are many angles from which to look at improvisation: Anna Maria Busse Berger has written about the importance of memory and visualization in music up through the 15th century; Ross Duffin has done hands-on experiments in 15th century improvisation; Richard Sherr, Timothy McGee, Tim Carter, Rob Wegman and Jane Flynn have looked at its social and liturgical functions in the 16th century; Klaus-Jürgens Sachs has made a sweeping survey of types of improvised counterpoint through the Renaissance; Philippe Canguilhem has made a thorough study of Lusitano's massive treatise on improvisation; Folker Froebe has looked at 16th century improvisation as a harbinger of harmonic sequence; and most recently Barnabé Janin has published a textbook for improvisation based on the practical experience of Jean-Yves Haymoz.³⁶

None of these authors has systematically investigated or tried out the veritable explosion of contrapuntal techniques that are described in 16th century treatises. I have elsewhere given a bird's-eye view of these techniques and shown that the very term "counterpoint" referred to improvisation.

In Part I of this essay, I will attempt a comprehensive list of what could be improvised and look closely at four techniques that show up often in repertoire; in Part II, I will elaborate the distinction between improvisation and composition as it appears in three treatises.

I will show that singers could improvise more sophisticated structures than we expect (even Zarlino is amazed at the *ex tempore* skills he describes), and contrast these skills with what seems to be implied by the word "composition." Drawing primarily on the writings of Coclico, Pontio, and Morley, I will demonstrate how Renaissance musicians in the second half of the sixteenth century may have improvised, how they conceived the difference between improvisation and composition, and how our knowledge of improvised practices can affect our conception of compositional process. One of the most interesting by-products of this study is that melodic material, the theme, both determines and is determined by the use to which it will be put—i.e., how the melody influences a contrapuntal *inventio* before it is deployed formally (in the phase of *dispositio*).

³⁴ P. Schubert: From Improvisation to the Composition, three 16th century case studies, p. 93., second part of the edition "*Improvising Early Music*", ...

³⁵ Adrianus Petit Coclico, *Compendium musices* (Nuremberg: Montanus and Neuber, 1552; facs. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1954), trans. Albert Seay as *Musical Compendium* (Colorado Springs: Colorado College Music Press, 1973), 22-23.

³⁶ For more details i.e. titles etc. of those works see in the Schubert article which could be found on line at www.academia.edu

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVISED?

Two-Part Improvisation

1. Adding a single line to a CF in even note values or in mixed note values
 - a. in note-against-note texture (includes gymel)
 - b. in mixed values or in species
 - c. with a fresh repeating motive (contraponto fugato) or with a repeating motive derived from the chant (ad imitatione), or with the motive inverted
 - d. any of the above that makes an invertible combination (includes “mirror” inversion)
2. Singing or playing in two-part stretto fuga

Three- and Four-Part Improvisation

3. Adding multiple lines to a CF in even note values or in mixed note values
 - a. adding two lines in fauxbourdon
 - b. adding two lines, one in parallel tenths
 - c. adding two lines in canon with each other
 - d. adding three lines (in contraponto fugato, in falsobordoni, also called the “parallel-sixth model,” or in various interval patterns against a scale)
4. Adding a line to a pre-existing duo
5. Singing or playing in 3- or 4-vv. stretto fuga (*doppia conseguenza*)

Contrapunto Fugato

This is perhaps the most important to many different types of composition. All cantus firmus (CF) compositions use this technique, and even in two-part music it can build simple musical forms. I have cited many authors on this subject and described its use in a textbook, *Modal Counterpoint, Renaissance Style*.³⁷ Banchieri’s little motet on *ecce sacerdos magnus* (Example 2) is a good example of what a young singer might have improvised, beginning with contraponto ad imitatione (the motive is borrowed from the first five notes of the chant), then moving on to repeat various freely invented motives. The end of this example is particularly effective and well formed, with short sequential repetitions of *et inventus est justus*, the last of which is extended into the cadence.

Example IV-13 Schubert ex 2. Banchieri Cartella,³⁸

³⁷ Peter Schubert, *Modal Counterpoint, Renaissance Style*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), chs. 8 and 9, and appendix 4.

³⁸ See Musical Examples A Ch. IV-13 Schubert ex.2

I decided to jump over many pages and examples as those interested primarily in this topic could and should read this Schubert' article entirely.

2.COMPOSITION³⁹

When he had seen his students firmly grounded in singing, able to pronounce neatly, to sing ornately and to put the text in the correct place, he taught them the perfect and imperfect types (of consonances) and the way of singing counterpoint on plainchant with these types. Those whom he noticed to be of high ability and happy soul he taught in a few words the rule of composing for three voices, afterwards for four, five, six, etc., always providing examples for them to imitate. ... The first requirement of a good composer is that he should know how to sing counterpoint by improvisation. Without this he will be nothing (Coclico).⁴⁰

You should know (as I have said) that from this florid, or diminished, counterpoint come a variety of compositions, like masses, motets, psalms, ricercars, lamentations, and madrigals (Pontio).⁴¹

... singing extempore upon a plainsong is indeede a peece of cunning, and very necessarie to be perfectly practiced of him who meaneth to be a composer for bringing of a quick sight, yet is it a great absurditie so to seek for a sight, as to make it the end of our studie... (Morley).⁴²

Before beginning to untangle the difference between counterpoint and composition, it must be admitted that not all authors make a clear distinction. Ferand noted Vicentino's use of the phrase "composing in the mind," and Zarlino dodges the question entirely. Bermudo, on the other hand, says: "There is the art of counterpoint, and that of composition. These terms differ in that composition is a collection and joining of many discrete parts with distinct harmony, particular concordances and special fine devices. Counterpoint is an improvised arrangement on a plainsong with varied melodies."

Our three authors agree that counterpoint is prior to composition (that is, the voice-leading rules are mostly the same), and they agree that counterpoint is essential to composition. Morley and Bermudo decry those who know no counterpoint and yet would try to compose. But composition is not merely written down improvisation, it must involve other considerations; but which? The areas that our three authors seem to agree on can be grouped into the following categories:

1. *Mode*. An improviser does not have to concern himself much with mode when working with a CF, so mode is more often included as a feature of composition when the distinction is made at all. (However, I have found that some knowledge of mode is essential when improvising three-voice stretto fuga, as I have often ended up in untenable *ficta* situations!)

2. *Text*. Many of the ways that text influences musical setting (speed, mode, interval affect, word-painting, cadence) might be ignored in improvisation, but are discussed in connection with composition. As for prosody, if improvisers sang words at all (as in Banchieri's Example 2), minimal attention to correct prosody would probably suffice, and so prosody is not an issue in discussions of improvisation.

³⁹ Here author gives quotes taken from various contemporary sources.

⁴⁰ Adrianus Petit Coclico, *Compendium musices* ...

⁴¹ Pietro Pontio, *Ragionamento di musica* (Parma: E. Viotto, 1588; facs. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1959).

⁴² Thomas Morley, *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* (London: Peter Short, 1597; facs. Oxford: Shakespeare Association, 1937), 215.

3. *Vertical sonority*. This category includes spacing and chord content. Most improvised counterpoint is in two parts, with the range of the parts presumably depending on the improvisers' voice ranges. In three-part improvised techniques, the ranges of the parts is never an issue: sometimes it falls naturally out of the technique itself, as in fauxbourdon, parallel-sixth and -tenth models, and stretto fuga as described by Zarlino, where the ranges are in alternating authentic and plagal modes.⁴³ However, composition brings with it the problem of managing more parts in several different ranges, which explains why theorists print tables of consonant sonorities and discuss *voci pari* texture. As for pitch content, Pontio (like Zarlino) specifies that three-voice sonorities should contain a fifth and a third.

4. *Cadences*. Improvisers knew how to make 2-voice cadences with suspensions. Although I have never seen a discussion of making cadences in stretto fuga, one can easily invent formulas for them. But on which notes to cadence, and making cadences in more parts, these are a problem—for these, theorists supplied model cadences (commonplaces) in four to six parts.

5. *Choosing good models*. References to specific composers and pieces is generally reserved for parts of treatises dealing with composition.

6. *Awareness of genre and style*. An improviser need not apparently concern himself with musically differentiating a madrigal from a motet, but a composer must. And eschewing *passé* fashion, as Morley urged, might not be an issue for an improviser. ...

3. CONCLUSION

Although the term “counterpoint” refers to improvisation (and sometimes only to note-against-note counterpoint), it comprises not only basic voice-leading rules but also sophisticated structural patterns of repetition that will be used in composition. These patterns include adding parts to a CF (in parallel sixths and thirds, with repetition of a motive, with repetition using invertible counterpoint, and with canonic repetition in the added voices) and free canons in 2-4 voices. For us, knowing which techniques could be improvised provides a list of contrapuntal behaviours that we can learn to spot, and that enrich our understanding and appreciation of composed repertoire.⁴⁴ Actually trying out what is described in treatises gives us insight into “thinking musically” in the Renaissance. I have found for instance that memory and visualization are essential to success in improvisation, and I feel sure these skills would facilitate composition, especially when composing in sections on erasable *cartelle*. A physical, intuitive understanding of improvisation reveals patterns of thought that lie behind the making of music. Further, it causes us to re-evaluate the esteem (or contempt) in which we hold “learned” the contrapuntal techniques of the day: if a boy could do invertible counterpoint in his head then, when we find it in a composition, it seems not so much “learned” as perfectly natural.

The improviser is actively engaged, responding on the spot, and coming up with little (mostly 2- and 3-voice) combinations, or *inventioni*, that can be used in a composition. The composer has a thesaurus of these the back of his mind, inculcated with his earliest training as a singer. However, to make a finished composition, he has to stand outside and consider various options for the work as a whole. The *inventioni* must be deployed in the process of *dispositio* according to

⁴³ PSch: That is, the outer voices are an octave apart, and the middle part is a fifth from one of them. Zarlino writes that if one part is in the authentic, the adjacent part(s) should be in the plagal mode (*Le institutioni harmoniche* 1558, IV, ch. 31, 338). In Banchieri's Ex. 2 the voices are unusually far apart, as they are in some of Lusitano's examples (see no. 7).

⁴⁴ PSch: Julie Cumming has inventoried improvised techniques in several compositions in “From Two-Part Framework to Movable Module,” in *Medieval Music in Practice: Essays in Honor of Richard Crocker*, ed. Judith Peraino (Münster: American Institute of Musicology, 2012), 175-214.

artistically self-conscious considerations that are proper to making full-textured pieces of lasting value, pieces that must hold up against masterworks of preceding generations. For this, the composer must find suitable *soggetti* and an appropriate mode for the text, must articulate a larger structure with cadences, must arrange good-sounding sonorities in many voices, must compose music appropriate to the genre, and must improve on good models. Having improvised as a boy won't help him with these tasks. But, once he has made those choices, the working out of the duos and trios and all the details of counterpoint and voice leading will be a piece of cake.

Treatises may differ on the exact boundary between improvisation and composition, but our three authors clearly believed there was such a boundary, and our understanding of compositional process in the Renaissance must take this into account. Julie Cumming has eloquently expressed several ways that knowledge of improvisatory practice can affect musicology.⁴⁵ Our familiarity with those techniques that could be improvised and our ability to distinguish them from those aspects of the piece that were the product of reflection will give us a better “feel” for the music, give depth and precision to our analyses, and make us better able to appreciate the composer's art.

4.7. R. C. Wegman: What is Contrapunct?⁴⁶

The author begins his article by recounting the story of young Beethoven, who in 1792 went to Vienna to begin studying counterpoint with Haydn. Even at the age of twenty-one, Beethoven was eager to undertake this course of study, despite having a less than enthusiastic teacher, all in pursuit of mastering the art of counterpoint. Wegman:

He did not experience that as demeaning at all. So what was the value he perceived in these lessons? What did counterpoint represent to him? What, in his view, had been lacking in the compositions he had already written before his departure to Vienna? And how did he expect his training in counterpoint to improve them?

When dealing with questions such as these, writers often invoke an analogy with language. That is to say if the art of composition can be seen as a kind of language, then the rules of counterpoint would be its grammar. The analogy makes a certain kind of sense. We can all learn a language by speaking along with native speakers, and after a while we may even become quite fluent in it—this, of course, is how we learned our mother tongue. Yet without formal training in the grammar and syntax of language, in the underlying structure, we may never feel totally confident that we have truly mastered it. So we might well feel, even at age twenty, that it could be useful to receive a thorough grounding in grammar before moving on, say, to advanced creative writing. ...

To return to our analogy with language, is it not true that by the time we are taught the grammar of our native tongue—in my case, in school around the age of eight—we are already fluent speakers, and do not actually need the grammar to make ourselves understood? Is grammar not really an afterthought, a distillation of rules and principles that naturally evolved in living language, well before it occurred to anyone to write them down?

With this last question, we are already touching on the theme I propose to explore in this contribution—the question of improvisation. When it comes to language, we are all improvisers, we literally improvise all day long. In everyday speech, we utter the first words of a sentence

⁴⁵ See later: Cumming, Julie E. “Renaissance Improvisation and Musicology,” *Music Theory Online* 19/2 (2013), www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.13.19.2/mto.13.19.2_cumming.php.

⁴⁶ Rob C. Wegman: What is counterpoint? p. 9., third part of the edition *Improvising Early Music*, ...

even before we know how that sentence is going to end. By the time we have completed the sentence, it always turns out as a perfectly formed syntactic whole, neatly obeying the rules of grammar—even though we have given those rules scarcely any thought while uttering it. The same is true of discourse at large. When we speak, we do not always know what we are going to say a minute from now, or how we are going to say it. All we know is that we will say whatever seems appropriate at that point, and we are not going to worry about it until we get there.

Maybe this is where the analogy between counterpoint and grammar breaks down. While it may be true that the counterpoint lessons gave Beethoven a kind of musical grammar, it certainly was not the grammar of a living language. By the eighteenth century, counterpoint was a dead language, no longer spoken, no longer evolving. It was a set of abstract theory exercises on paper, useful perhaps from a pedagogical point of view, yet for professional musicians it was perfectly possible to get by without formal training in it—as Beethoven’s early compositions amply demonstrate.

Once upon a time, of course, it had been different—counterpoint had been a living language. Long before Beethoven’s time, mastering counterpoint had meant more, much more, than the ability to write exercises. It had meant being able to sing it on the spot, in exactly the same way that you and I speak language on the spot. It meant to sing music that observed the rules of counterpoint as naturally and self-evidently as our everyday sentences obey the rules of grammar. Doing so may not have been called “improvisation” at the time, but then we do not call our everyday speech “improvisation” either—even though technically it is just that. It was called “to sing counterpoint,” or just “to sing,” just as we talk about speaking language, or just speaking.

This is the state of affairs as it must have prevailed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. People learned counterpoint by doing it, and many must have acquired it simply by singing along, picking up the idiom just as we are likely to pick up a language if we stay in another country for long enough. So perhaps this is how we might view the question raised earlier. ...

In the Renaissance, on the other hand, the situation had been very different. Consider what Johannes Tinctoris wrote in the last chapter of his treatise on counterpoint, the *Liber de arte contrapuncti* of 1477. “I have known not even one man,” he says, “who has achieved eminent or noble rank among musicians if he began to compose or to sing *super librum* /that is, to improvise counterpoint/ at or above his twentieth year of age.” A living language—which counterpoint for Tinctoris certainly was—has to be acquired in childhood, otherwise it will be too late. Here the analogy with language works very well indeed. For if a child has not learned to speak any language by the age of about eight, then he or she never will learn to speak, because the brain can only develop the wiring for speech during a circumscribed phase of its early development. After that, the opportunity will be gone forever. ...

A fifteenth-century choirboy had to sing and practice counterpoint, day after day, learn from his mistakes, listen to how others were doing it, follow their example, until he had internalized the language, and could handle it as effortlessly as you or I can conduct a conversation on the phone. That may seem like a lot to demand from a child. On the other hand, counterpoint was the only music, apart from plainchant, that anyone was ever likely to hear. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, counterpoint was the world language in music, the musical *lingua franca* spoken everywhere in Western Europe, from England to Denmark, to Poland and Bohemia, to Spain and Italy—and, in the sixteenth century, even in the new world. What was not counterpoint or plainchant had no claim to being music at all.

At some point in its history, then, counterpoint must have died, passed from the living language it had been in the Renaissance, to the dead language that Beethoven was at such considerable pains to learn. ...

It may be helpful to think of the history of counterpoint as being marked by this major break around 1600. Yet the break is not quite so clear-cut as I have made it sound; there is also a great deal of continuity. While there is no question that counterpoint was the language in which polyphony was improvised during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it was of course also the language of composition. The written dimension was there from the very beginning. ...

Also in this article I decide to “jump” over many pages and music examples which are extremely interesting but not linked with our main topic of this chapter. You can read the entire article on www.academia.edu

Unfortunately, what we have inherited from the Middle Ages and Renaissance is only the written tradition, and the pedagogy of the dead language that counterpoint has become. The oral tradition has died out, even though *chant sur le livre* is reported to have been practiced in French churches as late as the nineteenth century. As a consequence, music historians find themselves in a paradoxical situation. If they wish to come to an understanding of that lost oral tradition, they must of necessity turn to written traces. And that seems like a hopeless undertaking. Imagine trying to recover and relive the world of Bebop if all we had was the few transcriptions that some contemporaries might have committed to paper. Transcriptions can never substitute for the live experience. They give us traces of what was heard, yet they distort those traces at the same time.

Let me give an example to illustrate some of the problems we’re dealing with. Figure 1 shows the preface and first page of a set of partbooks printed in Venice in 1574. It is a collection of liturgical music, and it is extremely rare—as far as I know the only surviving copy in the world is kept in the Royal Library in Brussels. The print is devoted to polyphonic *Introits* for several major feasts in the liturgical calendar, in settings ranging from four to six parts. The author—if that is the right word—is Hippolito Chamaterò di Negri, choirmaster at the Duomo of Udine, and a direct contemporary of Palestrina. In the preface, Chamaterò explains that the settings that follow are essentially records, transcriptions, of an improvised practice that could be heard in the Duomo under his direction, and which reportedly provoked considerable admiration amongst those who heard them.⁴⁷

*Example IV-14 Wegman Fig.1. Hippolito Chamaterò di Negri, Li introiti fondati sopra il canto fermo del basso (Venice: l’erede di Girolamo Scotto, 1574), BassusPartbook, 2—3*⁴⁸

... when I was formerly in the service of the honored Duomo, people took no small delight in the music of the Introits, and rejoiced in seeing my choirboys rival with one another in the making of counterpoints *all’ improvviso*.

If we are to take Chamaterò at his word, then, his collection should give us a reliable idea of improvised polyphony as it could typically be heard in Italy in the late sixteenth century. After all, his print is dedicated to the canons of the Duomo of Udine, so if those canons were to believe him, the settings should bear more than a passing resemblance to what those same canons had heard in live performances in their own church. So let us consider an example from the collection, the Introit for Easter Sunday, *Resurrexi* (Appendix I).

⁴⁷ Hippolito Chamaterò di Negri, *Li introiti* ...

⁴⁸ See Musical Examples A Ch. IV-14 Wegman fig.1 De Negri original, IV-15 transcription and under More Music/Ferand.

If we could take a time machine, and visit the Duomo of Udine on Easter Sunday 1574, is this a fair approximation of what we would have heard? It sounds almost too good to be true. The counterpoint is flawless, there are no awkward dissonances, there are no parallel fifths and octaves that stand out conspicuously, and, as if all that were not enough, the polyphony is marvellously rich in imitative gestures, picked up from voice to voice. It strains credibility that even the most thoroughly trained singers and choirboys in the sixteenth century would have been able to produce something of such contrapuntal polish and perfection, and that not from these partbooks, but fresh, spontaneous, on the spot. Surely, in everyday life there would have been clashes, parallels, wrongly timed imitations. True, Chamaterò could not be expected to provide an accurate reflection of such errors in a print that was meant to be useful to others. Yet notwithstanding his disclaimer, we may have to insist that his print is likely, at best, to contain heavily edited versions of the real thing. ...

So, whether we can bring ourselves to believe it or not, improvised counterpoint really did sound like the examples we have seen in this contribution. Or perhaps we should put it a little more carefully. To those who were familiar with the tradition, improvised counterpoint did sound like the examples printed above. That is why they transcribed them the way they did. To us it need not necessarily have sounded that way, too. Nor would we necessarily have transcribed it the way they did.

There is one major divide that separates us from the tradition of improvised counterpoint, and it is a divide that has more to do with how we listen and think than with the objective reality of the music itself. Since we are no longer familiar with the tradition, our principal frame of reference is composed music. So when we deal with improvisation, we have no choice but to define it in terms of composition. Question: what is improvisation? Answer: it is everything that composition is not. The problem with this answer is not just that it is symptomatic of the divide I just mentioned, but that it sets us up to expect improvisation to be a certain kind of music. Then when we hear an improvisation, or something claimed to be an improvisation, like the examples printed in this essay, it is not quite what we expect, or are capable of believing.

Let me give an example. If we lived in a culture in which everyday communication was done only in sign language, and in which we reserved the organ of speech exclusively for the recitation of works of high literary merit, we would probably lose the ability to speak spontaneously. Whatever we might try to say in a verbal utterance would inevitably be measured against the standards of the literary works we were accustomed to recite. And it would fall hopelessly short. If we then came in contact with another culture where people actually spoke spontaneously, we would probably need a word for what was special about their way of speaking. What we would say, conceivably, is: their speaking is improvised. Of course that would have seemed quite incredible to us, because we had only one stylistic register with which to hear and appreciate speech, namely a bookish one, and it was the wrong register with which to hear improvisation. The critical register we needed, and that we did not have, was “colloquial” rather than “bookish.” Evaluating speech, in large part, is a matter of recognizing which register is being used, and on this point we have an almost implausibly keen sensibility. There is the stylistic register, not only of colloquial English, but of the scholarly article, of the sleeve notes, of talking with my brother back in Holland, of addressing a police officer, of making light conversation over a drink, and we shift registers effortlessly.

Yet we cannot make a similar shift in register when listening to improvised counterpoint, and as a consequence, that implausibly keen sensibility is heightened unreasonably. We may well be far less inclined to be tolerant of errors in improvised counterpoint than we would be in the performance of composed music. When you hear, for example, a motet by Palestrina sung in church and some singer gets it wrong at one point, we still know what he was supposed to sing,

and we know that he will get it right the next time. We might still think it was overall a good performance. But the same sort of error in an improvisation would not be entitled to such leniency. It would trigger the very tripwire we had set up in advance: is it actually possible to improvise counterpoint? It would confirm what we had assumed to begin with—that you cannot improvise without violating the rules of counterpoint again and again. And so the error would distract us, to a greater degree than the same error might have done in a performance of a Dufay motet. That motet we could actually hear as music.

The same could be argued about transcriptions of improvisation. To return to our earlier analogy, if we were equipped only to recite literary English, and if someone claimed he could improvise speech without planning or premeditation, all we would be listening for was the sorts of errors you would never see in a literary text. We would not be equipped with the register for colloquial English, in which you barely hear those errors, or even not at all—not because the errors are not there, but because you automatically correct them, because you know what the speaker meant to say, or how he meant to say it. If we transcribed colloquial English, we would certainly not write down those errors exactly as they had been made, but would correct them without realizing that we were doing so. For an error has no place on paper. That is why we occasionally need the word *sic* to confirm that we actually intend to leave an error uncorrected, or to stop others from correcting it.

We do not think it is cheating to render a spoken, improvised text in immaculate English, to edit out all the errors, and to tidy it up with punctuation. For in a sense, we really do hear colloquial English as we would transcribe it. And that, undoubtedly, is how Chamaterò transcribed the improvisations that had been sung under his direction: he transcribed not just what was being sung, but also how a proper listener would have heard it. This is what we would have heard if we had been familiar with the tradition.

In a way it makes perfect sense to shift attention away from the musical notation, *per se*, to the way it is heard. Because hearing and listening are also a living practice, an oral tradition, you might say, and one that has been lost, too. It is true that we have no choice but to re-encounter the tradition through its written traces, but those traces cannot tell us the whole story. In a way they are meant to leave us incredulous, to make us feel that music could not possibly have been improvised this way. For it is that gap, that divide, that reminds us what we have lost, and by whose disappearance we may one day be able to tell if we have truly regained it.

4.8. Julie E. Cumming: Renaissance Improvisation and Musicology⁴⁹

The article by prof. Cumming (she is working together with prof. P. Schubert for years) I shall bring in its entirety:

KEYWORDS: Renaissance, improvisation, counterpoint, Fux, Josquin Desprez, Gioseffo Zarlino, Francisco de Montanos, canon, compositional process, analysis, musical style, pedagogy

ABSTRACT: Understanding the role of improvisation in Renaissance polyphony has transformed the author's musicology in five areas: compositional process, analysis of Renaissance music, style change, pedagogy, and Renaissance culture.

[1] Musicologists like me, who study Renaissance music, have usually studied surviving musical scores and documents. We knew that there were unwritten musical traditions, but since we

⁴⁹ Volume 19, Number 2, June 2013 Copyright © 2013 Society for Music Theory.
For music examples see A Ch. IV-15 and 16 Cumming

thought we had no access to them, we made little attempt to recover them. Several developments in musicology and music theory have changed all that.

[2] First, Rob Wegman published an article (1996) stating that the role of the composer first emerged at the end of the fifteenth century, before that all musicians were “makers” or improvisers. But he did not explain how or what they improvised.

[3] Then Jessie Ann Owens (1997) showed that composers did not use scores when they composed Renaissance music Her evidence—treatises and some of the few surviving autograph manuscripts from the Renaissance—was compelling. But it was hard for most of us to imagine how they actually did it.

[4] Peter Schubert pointed out that the term “counterpoint” in Renaissance treatises did not mean written composition: instead it meant improvised polyphony for singers (2002, 503).⁵⁰ He started to figure out what musicians could improvise, and how they did it: he taught himself to do it, and taught others, including me.

[5] The idea of counterpoint as improvised polyphony is in stark contrast to the standard view of counterpoint, as in *Gradus ad Parnassum (Ascent to Parnassus)* by Johann Joseph Fux (1725/1966), where counterpoint is presented as the least instinctive, most controlled form of written composition. Centuries of counterpoint students have agonized over every first-species exercise; canons are considered the most difficult, arcane form of composition, which only the most accomplished composers could write.

[6] But it turns out that counterpoint is something that any musician (not just geniuses like Josquin and Bach) can do on the spot. Every choirboy in the Renaissance could improvise, and did so every day (Canguilhem 2011, 45—46). Renaissance improvisation is highly constrained: in order to produce correct improvised counterpoint there is a limited set of choices for every new note. It is this very limitation of choice that makes it relatively easy to improvise in real time.

You can even learn to do it from Peter Schubert’s YouTube videos:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n01J393WpKk>

[7] Realizing that improvisation was a basic skill practiced by every choirboy has transformed my research and my teaching on Renaissance music in at least five different areas: compositional process, analysis of Renaissance music, style change, pedagogy, and Renaissance culture. Each of these areas is the subject of a brief discussion here.

[8] **Compositional process.** When I realized that Renaissance composers could improvise polyphony in two, three, or more parts—and that I could even do it myself—it became much easier to imagine how they could look at one part and sing or hear or write down another, even if the parts were not aligned in a score.

[9] Here is an example of how composers might have worked. It is possible to improvise a canon after one time unit in first species (dubbed “stretto fuga” by John Milsom, 2005). All you have to do is to sing the correct intervals in the lead voice. The choice of melodic intervals depends on the time and pitch intervals of imitation; see **Table 1**.⁵¹

⁵⁰ JC.: German-language publications, such as Sachs 1983 and Jans 1986, had made similar points, but they had relatively little impact on English-language scholarship.

⁵¹ See Musical Examples A Ch. IV-15 Cumming, table 1.

[10] To improvise a canon after one time unit at the fifth below (shaded in yellow in Table 1), you make up a melody that includes only thirds and fifths down, seconds and fourths up, and unisons. The sixteenth-century Spanish music theorist Francisco de Montanos includes an example of such a canon (**Example 1**; Schubert 2002, 518).⁵²

[11] His simple melody (using a unison, two ascending seconds, two descending thirds and an ascending fourth) results in a very simple—but contrapuntally correct—duo. He then goes on in (b) to embellish the bare first species structure with repeated notes and passing tones. In (c) he includes more advanced embellishments: ties, escape tones, and anticipations. The bare-bones first-species duo has become a Renaissance canon in which the horizontal melodies have an interesting rhythmic profile and all sense of homorhythm has disappeared.

[12] It is relatively easy to improvise a two-voice canon; but Gioseffo Zarlino says that you should also be able to improvise a third voice to any duo. He provides two sample added voices for a duo by Josquin Desprez that begins with a canon after one semibreve at the fifth above (**Example 2**; Schubert 2002, 214)⁵³. Any group of Renaissance church musicians would have been able to improvise a three-voice piece of this kind; a musician could also have used these techniques in order to compose without a score.

[13] **Analysis of Renaissance music.** Once I had a pretty good grasp of the various improvisable contrapuntal techniques and textures (see Schubert 2008, forthcoming [2013]), I could go through a piece and identify the contrapuntal techniques used in almost every phrase. This new set of names allowed me to see things in the music that I hadn't seen before, and to recognize when a composer was using the same technique in different places (Cumming 2011, 2013). The focus of analysis can then move back and forth between the techniques used in a single phrase and issues of disposition: Why did the composer use these techniques in this order? And what impact do those choices have on the shape or form of the work?

[14] When Peter Schubert and I figured out that you can improvise a canon based on any chant (and practiced doing it every day for two months), we suddenly understood why canonic chant melodies were rhythmicized or paraphrased in particular ways (Cumming and Schubert 2011—2012). In **Example 3**⁵⁴ Josquin took a chant fragment (shown in the red box) and turned it into a chant-paraphrase canon at the fifth below. He made the time interval a breve, and embellished the tune very lightly.

[15] One interval in this chant does not conform to the melodic intervals required for correct canon at the fifth below: the descending second over “dul” of *dulcis* (shown with a red slur in the chant). Josquin solved this problem by making the descending second a submetric passing tone (B \flat -A within one breve, shown with a red slur in the polyphony).⁵⁵ He also added a third voice like Zarlino's (**Example 2**). Josquin's third voice seems to take its inspiration from the descending line with the submetric passing tone, since it is constructed with three descending phrases that begin with the dotted semibreve-minim rhythm (see blue slurs). This piece is highly constrained, with a strict canon based on a pre-existent melody; it is also beautiful and expressive.

⁵² See Musical Examples A Ch. IV-16 Cumming (Schubert), ex.1

⁵³ Ibid., IV-16 Cumming (Schubert), ex.2

⁵⁴ Ibid., Cumming (Schubert), ex.3

⁵⁵ JC.: It is interesting to note that the melodic intervals in this canon by Josquin are the same as those in the Montanos canon, Example 1. The only difference is one of mode; here there is a major third above the first note, while in the Montanos canon it is minor.

[16] **Style change.** One focus of my research for many years has been the development of imitative texture in the late fifteenth century, and in 2003—2004 I worked with a team of students to collect data on the time and pitch intervals of imitation at the beginnings of the motets printed by Petrucci between 1502 and 1508. (Some of my findings are in Cumming 2012.) Once I had learned from Peter Schubert that improvisable canon in four voices was possible, we searched my data for these canonic patterns—and found, to my surprise, that they were the most common patterns for four-voice points of imitation. This has provided a whole new view of how imitation developed (Cumming and Schubert forthcoming [2014]).

[17] **Pedagogy.** Teaching vocal ensemble improvisation in the context of a music history or theory course is transformative. For classical musicians who spend much of their time learning to play what is on the page, the experience of making up music—and music that sounds like the Renaissance music they have been studying—is tremendously exciting. Ensemble improvisation also requires in-the-moment concentration that draws on multiple modes of engagement: singing, listening to the other voices and checking for mistakes, following rules, and making musical choices. Finding the same patterns in the Renaissance music they are studying provides a visceral connection to the music. I know of no musicological literature and very little theoretical literature on having students do Renaissance improvisation in the classroom, although Peter Schubert has used it with great success (Schubert 2008, which includes improvisation exercises, and Schubert 2011). This could be a fertile area for further research.

[18] **Improvisation and composition in Renaissance culture.** Improvised polyphony was everywhere in the Renaissance. It wasn't just the "improvvisatori" and "cantastorie" singing in the piazza described by Pirotta (1984) and Haar (1986). In a recent article describing the incredible feats of improvisation required of Spanish choir masters, Philippe Canguilhem (2011, 99) estimates that "the vast majority" of the polyphony heard in Philip II's chapel in sixteenth-century Spain was improvised. In earlier centuries the amount might have been even higher. The composed polyphony that comes down to us was a small fraction of the musical landscape. This realization transforms our sense of the past.

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4.9. Jean-Yves Haymoz: Improvisation à la Renaissance - Singing on a Book⁵⁶

Ernest Ferand (1938) was the first musicologist to study the role of improvisation in the history of Western music. Having encountered its presence everywhere, he documented the testimonies, the techniques used, and also noted its psychological effect. In this regard, he observed a

⁵⁶ Preface to the handbook: Barnabé Janin, *Chanter sur le livre*, Manuel pratique d'improvisation polyphonique de la Renaissance (XVe et XVIe siècles), second edition, (Edition) Symétrie, Lyon, 2014.

constant reference to pleasure on the part of the listeners and passion on the part of the musicians! However, during the twentieth century, improvisation was understood differently. It was perceived in opposition to composition, and it was Carl Dahlhaus (1979) who clarified this false antinomy.

Counterpoint had been transformed into a scholarly discipline by Johann Joseph Fux in his *Gradus ad Parnassum* (1725). Thus, counterpoint was now called strict or rigorous, becoming a discipline, a solitary writing exercise, which distanced it from the idea of improvisation. Following Ferand's lead, Anglo-Saxon musicology began using these improvisation techniques as a new paradigm for analysing musical repertoires. Markus Jans (1986) described how they not only allowed for a new understanding but also a new listening experience. This was the starting point for a new practice: "improvised counterpoint," whose importance was recognized and added to the curriculum of students of early music, both as an aid to ear training and as a resource for understanding the musical language of the Renaissance, alongside solmization.

During the Renaissance, as had always been done before the [French] Revolution, musicians learned music without dividing it into different disciplines. Reading, composition, performance, organology, ornamentation, and improvisation were inseparable components of their musical practice. Add to this the knowledge of liturgy, religious and secular repertoire, and rituals, and we see how different our vision of music learning is!

David Mesquita, a professor at the *Schola Cantorum Basiliensis*, is currently working on Spanish treatises that still hold many surprises. He discovered this anecdote: to apply for a position as a chapel master in Spain in the sixteenth century, one had to improvise three voices over a plainchant: the first voice sung by the applicant, but pronouncing the note names of a second voice sung by another singer, and finally, showing on their hand the notes sung by a third. This was because, it was said, on certain days, good improvisers might falter, and yet improvisation had to continue. ...

In most cases, improvised counterpoint is practiced based on a given melody, the *cantus firmus*. This demonstrates the strong connection this practice maintains with religious music: day after day, to make the various degrees of solemnity of the liturgical calendar festivals perceptible, voices were added variably to the antiphons of plainchant. In French, this was referred to as *chanter sur le livre*, which depicts the singer carefully scrutinizing the notes of the *cantus firmus* to discern other notes that would form good consonances with it. In Germany, they prefer to speak of *sortisatio* (from *sortisare*, "to improvise," whose root means "draw lots, chance, risk"), which emphasizes the fact that the singer often finds themselves in a situation where they must choose very quickly between two good solutions, somewhat as if they had to draw the next note by chance. In Italy, they speak of *contrapunto alla mente*, a contrapuntal thought "mentally," meditated upon as Quintilian would say.

As mentioned earlier, improvisation is not the enemy of composition. Adrianus Petit Coclico (1552) recommends that children practice quickly writing simple counterpoints on *cantus firmus* on their slates. He talks about writing *ex tempore*. This speed training allows one to visualize what one is doing when singing and accustoms us to read the notes we want to sing directly on the staff of the *cantus firmus*, which corresponds well to the idea of "*cantare super librum*." Lodovico Zacconi (1592) talks about his learning experience, a rich experience because he had two teachers! The first, he says, interrupted him at the first mistake and showed him how to do it, but Lodovico couldn't progress; the second - the best one - made him do exercises without stopping on a *cantus firmus*, proposing small constraints each time that allowed him, little by little, to build true know-how, to "fill the reservoir," as Victor Hugo would have said.

This book proposes to work in this direction. Take a technique, consider it as a constraint or instruction, and carry out an entire improvisation, and several times. It is not necessary to stop to note your mistakes; it is more important to accumulate experiences to succeed while maintaining the rhythm. The more exercises you do, the more you progress. Of course, you can work alone by recording the given melodies, but you will progress better with colleagues, whose mistakes can also help you progress! And since improvisation creates pleasure, you will work in a good mood! This manual offers the discovery of improvisation based on fairly simple instructions, which will allow you to make music in 2, 3, and 4 voices and to make canons. The recent edition of Lusitano's treatises (a very experienced singer from the early 16th century in Rome), carried out by Philippe Canguilhem, is a very good source of examples of this kind of improvisation. This constitutes a very good basis from which one can continue later by using, on the one hand, models drawn from the works of the great masters and, on the other hand, by working on improvising a second voice on a *cantus firmus*, more virtuosic and varied, as shown by Tinctoris or Ortiz.

If this book is limited to the Renaissance, it does not mean that the history of improvised counterpoint ends in the 16th century. Jean-Jacques Rousseau talks about it in his *Dictionnaire* (1768): "Singing on the book requires a lot of science, habit, and ear in those who perform it... however, there are church musicians so well versed in this kind of singing that they start and even pursue fugues when the subject allows it, without confusing and crossing the parts, nor making mistakes in the harmony." The treatises of Madin and Marchand still show that choirboys continued to "sing on the book" in certain cathedrals in France at the end of the 18th century.

As one can see, this practice is still being discovered, and new adventures will present themselves to those who cultivate it... We wish our reader to feel like turning these pages and to motivate their friends to work!

NB: Please, consult also the counterpoint improvisation website: contrapunctus.org

4.10. Barnabé Janin: Chanter sur livre (Singing on a Book):⁵⁷

I decided to bring here the complete *Avant-propos* where author explains how one should work with this manual. Again, the best idea would be to lend this great book from a library or to buy it, like I did.

How to use this practical manual?

This practical manual is a tool for improvisation in the styles of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance (15th and 16th centuries). The first part describes different improvisation techniques, while the second part provides a collection of melodies on which to improvise.

- Improvisation Techniques: Choose Your Chapter!

The various techniques presented require different skills and group sizes. Choose the chapter that suits your level, interest, and group of improvisers.

- Principles:

⁵⁷ Janin, Barnabé, *Chanter sur le livre*, ... for more detailed instructions, see Chapter 5., p. 22 and 33.

For each chapter, precise procedures are given including instructions for each voice. Read them carefully and sing the examples.

- It's Your Turn!

Move on to applying the principles: this section refers to the melodies in the second part of the book on which you can improvise. It also offers, in some cases, helpful "working steps" or "preparatory exercises."

- Keep Going...

To continue and enrich your skills, this section suggests some avenues: a slightly modified instruction, a different procedure, a related technique to explore in another chapter.

How to use this practical guide?

This practical manual is a tool for improvisation in the styles of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance (15th and 16th centuries). The first part describes different improvisation techniques; others offer a collection of melodies on which to improvise.

Improvisation techniques: choose your chapter.

Different presented techniques require different skills and materials: choose a chapter tailored to your level, your interest and your group of improvisers.

Principles

For each chapter, they provide a precise procedure, including instructions for each voice. Read them carefully and sing the examples.

Continue to apply the principle: this section in the second part of the book deals with melodies you can improvise on. It also offers, in some cases, some useful "work steps" or "preparatory exercises".

To continue and enrich your knowledge, this section suggests several ways: a slightly modified instruction, a different procedure, a similar technique that will be revealed in the second chapter.

- Melodies for Improvisation:

This extensive chapter alone forms a small collection of secular and sacred music from the 15th and 16th centuries. These melodies await your gentle counterpoints but can also be sung as they are... for the pleasure of monody.

- Elements of Theory - Bibliography:

The penultimate chapter explains some musical notions and terms used in the book; finally, a bibliography directs the reader to treatises, books, and articles that will allow them to expand their reflections on improvisation and beyond.

To accompany this manual

Like other works of the same genre, this manual cannot do without its essential complements: learning with a teacher, but above all, regular practice with musician friends. It is within this framework that it will find its rightful place.

Sources of this work

To write this manual, we relied on theoretical and musical texts, as well as practical experience in improvisation. These "sources" are as follows:

1. Ancient treatises.
2. Written repertoire.
3. Teaching experience.
4. Practice of improvisation in concert.

1. Ancient treatises

The bibliography at the end of the volume contains references to certain treatises that served for the elaboration of this manual. Ancient texts rarely provide the exact and detailed procedure for improvising according to a specific technique. Most of the time, they only provide a general instruction for each voice; sometimes they only give the final result in the form of a musical example. This work attempts to put these instructions and procedures into writing as they may have been given orally.

2. Written repertoire

To varying degrees, examples of the techniques described in the treatises can be found in the written repertoire of the 15th and 16th centuries. Some musical pieces use these techniques entirely and exclusively, while others employ them only partially, or most often, combine several techniques. On the other hand, some improvisation models are found in numerous written musical pieces, while others are less represented.

The written music has therefore inspired certain improvisation instructions in this manual, both in the field of counterpoint proper and in that of melodic ornamentation.

Like other works of the same kind, this handbook cannot [function] without its essential additions: learning with a teacher, but above all regular practice with fellow musicians. In this context, she/he will find her/his rightful place.

3. Teaching experience

Among the musicologists and music teachers who worked on the rediscovery of ancient improvisation techniques, special tribute is due to Jean-Yves Haymoz, who, since the early 1990s, proposed teaching this musical practice. Based on the study of historical sources, he developed a modern practice called improvised counterpoint; he further developed its teaching, particularly through the definition of techniques and the development of specific exercises.

Today, the teaching of improvised counterpoint has spread, in various forms, to a number of conservatories and music schools. For my part, I have been dedicated to this for about ten years at the C.N.S.M.D. of Lyon, as well as in workshops and training sessions; many ideas for procedures described in this manual have emerged from this exciting work with students and trainees.

4. "Chant sur le livre" in concert

Since 2002, the ensembles Obsidienne (directed by Emmanuel Bonnardot) and Le Chant sur le livre have put these improvisation techniques into practice in concerts. The decisive experience of performing on stage has shown the musical effectiveness: just like written music, improvised polyphonic music finds its place in a public performance. This experience has also allowed us to reflect on the ins and outs of this practice in public: the importance of preparation work, the combination of written and improvised music, the connection with the audience, etc., all of which remain relevant questions!

Singing on the book

During the Renaissance, improvising polyphony was done by "singing on the book" (*cantare super librum*): singers would add one or more additional melodic lines to a melody read from "the book." This book could be a sacred music book (gradual, antiphonary) or secular (songbook, book of bass dances).

Preparing for improvisation

Similar to some other styles, "singing on the book" does not involve creating unheard melodies, unknown to the improviser until the moment of expression. Everything here is the reuse of elements already heard, experienced, and polished; only their arrangement, the combination that connects them, and their unique expression at the moment they appear are original and unique.

The improviser's work, therefore, is to build a "musical toolbox" from which they will draw upon, at the moment of creating counterpoint, a variety of simple formulas and ideas gleaned from the repertoire, and which they will have developed the habit of using with their fellow musicians. As seen, there is no divine inspiration here: singing on the book is craftsmanship.

Simple counterpoint and florid counterpoint

As will be seen in this work, the techniques used in the practice of singing on the book are varied. Some produce simple counterpoint (one improvised note against one note of the *cantus firmus*), while others produce florid counterpoint (several notes against one note of the CF).

It goes without saying that improvisations in simple counterpoint present fewer theoretical possibilities than those in florid counterpoint. The rules of *gymel*, for example, provide tighter constraints on the improviser's melody than those of single-voice florid counterpoint on CF; similarly, creating an *altus* in 4ths and 3rds above the CF in a 4-voice piece offers less latitude than improvising a canon in fifths *ex nihilo*...

When the rules strictly guide improvisation, it often happens that, as the work progresses, the singer ends up settling on the melodic line that seems best to them, until they know it by heart. Not that they consider it absolutely definitive; they simply enjoy singing it. The improvised character then lies more in the phrasing, pronunciation, and particular expression of the moment: it is almost entirely interpretation.

Written music, improvised music

In the 15th and 16th centuries, written music and improvised music are united within the same practice, counterpoint. The art of counterpoint has two facets, written counterpoint (*scripto*) and imagined counterpoint (*mente*), both equally essential to the musician's training.

While improvisation allows, through its immediate and sensory nature, for the liberation of imagination and creativity, the act of writing allows, in return, for the structuring of musical thought and expression. It is therefore very useful, in counterpoint to improvisation work, to write counterpoint. By doing so, the improviser will, in addition to embarking on comprehensive studies of Renaissance written counterpoint, be given two pieces of advice:

- Write your counterpoints after improvising them. On the staff, the hand will arrange the notes according to principles that the eye and mind will record; upon returning to improvisation, this visual memory will provide you with more skill and expertise.

- Study written music. Besides the inherent pleasure it brings, singing written music will introduce you to many ideas and useful turns of phrase for improvisation. Analyse these scores by naming the language elements that concern you (consonances, dissonances, cadences, melodic intervals, etc.). Learn excerpts and formulas by heart!

Improvising with instruments

All the techniques presented in this work can be performed with instruments. Whether modern or early, they only need to follow the proposed instructions, paying particular attention to the range: for example, the *bassus* must remain the lowest voice!

Particular care can be taken in mixing timbres and registers: many trials in voice distribution and technique selection are sometimes necessary before finding the solution that sounds good...

As for polyphonic instruments, they can also benefit from this manual, provided that its procedures are transposed. Indeed, the fact that the same person - harpist, organist, lutenist, etc. - improvises all the voices allows for a constant adaptation of the voices to each other, and enables a wide variety in counterpoint. Therefore, do not hesitate to extrapolate the instructions given in this work!

Beyond this manual...

... there remain other techniques, combinations, and procedures to discover.

"*Der Mensch ist ein Gewohnheitstier*," Martin Erhardt told me. "Man is a creature of habit..."

The habit of improvising with the same partners creates reflexes and tacit understanding among musicians; freed from the weight of initial instructions, imagination can then turn to new forms, ideas...

The revival of "singing on the book" is still recent; the ensembles dedicated to it are still few.

The path is wide open to all... It is up to each individual to engage with it in their own way and to give this book the extensions that suit it.

The corner of historical, pedagogical, and metaphysical questions

By the way... what's the use of improvisation? Is singing on the book really improvisation? Did Renaissance musicians improvise according to the procedures in this manual? Can multiple people improvise per voice, or is singing on the book a matter for soloists? Can you extract a voice from a written polyphony and improvise a new polyphony around that voice? What role can Renaissance improvisation play in modern music education? Can everyone "sing on the book"? If so, how?

Should, must, can one improvise in public? What can be the meaning of a concert of improvised music?

Please, reader, consider this manual for what it is: the attempt of a 21st-century musician to help other 21st-century musicians create polyphonies *alla mente* in the style of the Renaissance... And if, with the help of this work, the lively and joyful practice of improvisation leads you, in the midst of a fourth's syncopation, a fauxbourdon, or a double canon, to answer the questions posed above in your own way, the author can only rejoice. Farewell!

To remember and to repeat:

[FERAND] Ornitoparchus rules, p.1-2

[BENT] p.6. Very important for the practice: To sing music from written notation ...

[OWENS] p.8. “composing without writing” or “composing in the mind”

[CANGUILHEM, p.10. From Memory to Imagination, Learning Counterpoint in the 15th Century: the 'Rule of the Degree' and Sight-Singing - important for the practice!

p.11. The Hand (*la mano*) of the counterpoint, p.12. The *sight*, The introduction of *visible discantus* in the rest of Europe

p.13. Conclusion

[MENKE- “ponere vel facere”] p.14

p.15. Coclico (1)

[MENKE-Ex centro], p.17. 1.The Baroque turning point

p.19. 2.Skeleton and diminution, p.20. 5.Ostinatos, 21. 6. Dissonant progressions

p.21. 7.Conclusion i.e. rules of ‘ex centro’ improvisation.

[SCHUBERT, From Improvisation to Composition], p.22

p.23. What could be improvised?

p.24. Composition, p.25. Conclusion

[WEGMAN-What is Contrapunct?] p.26, Comparison and similarity between language and improvisation pp.26-30

p.28. Hippolito Chamaterò di Negri, *Li introiti*

[CUMMING- Renaissance Improvisation and Musicology] p.30

[HAYMOZ-Introduction to Singing on the book] p.34

[JANIN- Chanter sur livre] p.36. How to use this practical manual?

p.38. To accompany this manual, Sources of this work

p.39. 3.Teaching experience, "Chant sur le livre" in concert, Preparing for improvisation, Simple counterpoint and florid counterpoint

p.40. Written music, improvised music, Improvising with instruments and Beyond this manual...

p.41. The corner of historical, pedagogical, and metaphysical questions

Reading recommendations:

BENT, Margaret, *Resfacta and Cantare Super Librum*, ... See also in the Appendix, 8.1.GENERAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

CANGUILHEM, Philippe: *Cantare con l'occhio della mente*, ... See 8.1. Ibid

CUMMING, Julie E.: *Renaissance Improvisation and Musicology*, *Music Theory Online* 19/2 (2013).

Improvising Early Music, (Schubert, Menke and Wegman), ... See 8.1. Ibid

JANIN, Barnabé: *Chanter sur le livre*, ... See 8.1. Ibid

MENKE, Johannes: "Ex centro" Improvisation, ... ibid "*Improvising Early Music*

SCHUBERT, Peter: *From Improvisation to the Composition, three 16th century case studies*, ibid "*Improvising Early Music*"

WEGMAN, Rob C.: *What is Counterpoint?*, ibid "*Improvising Early Music*"